LUKE BENNET'S HIDE OUT

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WILMER COLLECTION



THE BARKING OF THE DOGS AROUSED ALL THE MEN AROUND THE CAMP FIRE.—See page 20.

LUKE BENNETT'S HIDE OUT

A Story of the War



CAPTAIN [illegible], UNITED STATES SCOUT

AUTHOR OF "GILBERT THE TRAPPER," ETC., ETC.

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CHAPTER I.

SURROUNDED BY SHARPSHOOTERS.

"CHIPS, how long have you been in the service?"

"About twenty five years, man and boy."

"Well, I want to know if you ever before saw a naval expedition leave the water, and go philandering off through the woods, as we are doing now."

The speaker was a trim young gunboat officer, dressed in the uniform of an acting ensign. The companion whom he called "Chips" was an elderly man, who wore upon the lappel of his coat the badge of a warrant officer. He was the carpenter of the vessel to which the two belonged. It was the second dog watch—the only hours on shipboard that are devoted to fun and recreation. Supper was over, the boats had been hoisted at the davits, the boarding nettings triced up, and the hundred and seventy men composing the crew, with the exception of the few that were on duty, were gathered on the gun deck, smoking their pipes and conversing in low and guarded tones.

There was no laughing or singing, no loud noise of any sort. The banjo and violin were silent, and for three days the boatswain's mate had not been called upon for the usual hornpipe. The face of every one on board, from the captain down to the

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youngest wardroom boy, wore an expression of anxiety; and when I come to tell you just how they were situated and what they were trying to do, you will not wonder at it.

The crew of the gunboat Decatur had been through many a hard fought battle on the Mississippi river and its tributary streams, but they had never been in so much danger as they were at that moment. They did not know at what instant the springing of the rattle might call them to quarters to fight for their lives, and to defend their vessel from the assault of overwhelming boarding parties.

"I wonder if any boat ever went through here before," continued the young ensign, as he and his companion walked up and down the main deck, with their hands behind their backs.

"Oh, yes," replied the carpenter. "The streams that run through these swamps are all navigable for little cotton traders, and there was a good deal of traffic done between this country and Vicksburg before the war. There were a large number of planters through here then, and they raised big crops of cotton and corn."

"They must have done their farm work with boats instead of mules," said the ensign. "The water is three feet deep all over the lowlands."

"More than that in some places," answered Chips. "The Mississippi is so high that McPherson's corps, which is supposed to be operating with Grant against Vicksburg, is at Lake Providence, seventy miles away. They can't find dry ground to camp on any nearer than that. But you must remember that this has been an uncommon winter for high water and heavy rains, and that the levees that were built to protect the country from overflow have not been touched since the war began. More than that, they have been cut in several places to let the water of

the river into the bayous, so that our gunboats could make overland expeditions."

"And what have they amounted to?" said the ensign, in a tone of disgust. "The attempt to get the boats down to Red River by way of Lake Providence has proved a failure; the batteries at Haines' Bluff were altogether too strong for us; the Yazoo Pass expedition has been whipped and driven back; and now the Decatur and four other vessels have come up here into Steel's Bayou to leave their bones. If we've got to fight, I would rather face the batteries of Vicksburg than three or four regiments of sharpshooters any day in the week."

"Here, too," said Chips. "We can fight a battery with some hope of success; but we can do nothing with men who skulk behind trees and logs, and pop at every fellow who shows his nose at a port hole. I don't like the idea of being confined below from daylight until dark, and having but one cooked meal in twenty four hours. I wish the enemy would quit their bushwhacking tactics, bring some boats over from Vicksburg, and make an attempt to take us by boarding. We would give them a lesson in gunboat fighting that would stay by them for one while, I bet you."

"They are not such fools," replied the young officer. "As long as they can annoy us at a distance with perfect safety to themselves, they are not coming to close quarters to face hot water and shrapnel, you may depend upon that."

Chips was not the only one on board the Decatur who wished that the concealed sharpshooters, who had been constantly harassing them for the last three days, would show themselves in force, have a fair fight, and whip or get whipped. Although it was no later in the season than the middle of March, it was uncomfortably warm below, as it always is on

board an iron clad when the engineers are obliged to keep up steam; but it was against orders for anybody to show himself on deck during the daytime, and dangerous as well.

The banks of the bayou and all the surrounding country were under water, but there was a narrow strip of dry ground on the right hand bank, which was thickly covered with briers, bushes and cane, and on this ridge the four thousand sharpshooters, that had been sent out from Vicksburg to harass the expedition, found secure hiding places. Sometimes they would send their bullets against the Decatur's thick armor like hailstones, and then they would become so quiet that the crew told one another that they had grown tired of wasting their ammunition and gone back to the city; but if some imprudent and foolhardy fellow put his head out of a port to take observations, he was sure to become a target for a dozen or more concealed marksmen, some of whom proved to be dead shots. After three men had been killed outright, and as many more desperately wounded, the Decatur's crew concluded to obey orders and keep under cover. There were four other gunboats in the expedition, and they were all annoyed in the same way.

These incidents, and others which I shall try to describe in this story, happened in the spring of 1863, and the place where they occurred was within fifty miles of Vicksburg, which at that time was so strongly fortified that it was called the "Gibraltar of America." If you have paid close attention to your history, you will remember that General Sherman and Admiral Porter made a combined assault upon Vicksburg during the fall and winter of the previous year, but their efforts were not successful. The lowlands were so deeply covered with water that General Sherman could not use more than five of the twenty

thousand men that composed his army, and the fortifications at Haines' Bluff, which was situated on the Yazoo River, eleven miles from Vicksburg, were too strong for the gunboats. More than that, the river was filled with torpedoes, one of which sent the finest boat in the fleet, the Mound City, to the bottom in seven minutes.

After this failure General Grant took command in person, and then began a series of operations and maneuvers whose magnitude astonished the loyal but impatient people of the North, who were waiting anxiously for something to be done.

Among these operations were the "overland expeditions" that were undertaken by the gunboats and transports. The first, which left the river at Yazoo Pass, was composed of two heavy gunboats, one wooden ram, and transports enough to carry five thousand soldiers. The water course they followed was so narrow and tortuous, and so completely blocked with fallen timber, that it took them four days to go eighteen miles. They found water everywhere, and on a little island at the junction of the Tallahatchee and Yallabusha Rivers, a little fort mounting eleven guns, which successfully resisted their further progress.

The commanding general, who had many things to think of during those troublous times, was much concerned for the safety of this expedition. Reinforcements would have been of no use in a country that was covered with water, for the troops could not leave their transports. Relief, if it came at all, must come from another quarter; so he and the admiral resolved to get into the Yazoo River below the fort, cut it off from all help from Vicksburg, and capture the garrison.

With this object in view, the Sunflower expedition, consisting of five gunboats, four mortar boats, and

a number of transports loaded with soldiers, was sent into Steel's Bayou from the Yazoo River. This was the one to which the Decatur belonged.

No one, unless he did a soldier's duty during the Vicksburg campaign, can imagine the difficulties and dangers that beset this expedition from the day it started until it got back to the open river. The way was bad enough at the best; but in order to make it worse, the Confederates sent over a body of sharpshooters, who not only cut trees across the bayous in front of the gunboats, but shot every one of the crew who dared show his head at a port hole.

This was the way Ned Marsh and his shipmates were situated on the night I introduce them to the reader. Of course, under these circumstances the navigation of the narrow, crooked steam through which the fleet was slowly working its way, was irksome and perilous in the extreme. It was no wonder that the crew chafed and fretted, and longed for a fight to break the monotony.

"Boat ahoy!" hailed the sentry on the forecastle. He did not shout out the words as if his boat had been at anchor upon the broad bosom of the Mississippi, but spoke them in distinct tones just loud enough to reach the ears of the persons for whom they were intended.

"Ay, ay!" was the answer to the hail.

"A wardroom officer from one of the other vessels," exclaimed the young ensign. "He is coming down with muffled sticks, too," he added, as a dingy, propelled by four noiseless oars, shot past the Decatur's bow and rounded to under her after guard. "Who is he, and what does he want here at this time of night?"

About five minutes later this question was answered in a way that made Ned Marsh's hair stand on end.

CHAPTER II.

A MISSION OF DANGER.

Naval etiquette requires that, on ordinary occasions, an officer above the rank of ensign shall be received at the side during the day time by the officer of the deck, the boatswain's mate, and two or more side boys, the first saluting, the latter uncovering their heads and the boatswain blowing his whistle. At night he is received with lanterns, the boatswain and his pipe being dispensed with. But this was not an ordinary occasion. A lantern would have proved a tempting target to one of those watchful sharpshooters on the ridge, and its use would have been contrary to orders; consequently the visiting officer had to scramble aboard in the dark, and there was no one at the side to meet him except the officer of the deck. The two were strangers to each other, but that did not prevent them from exchanging a few hurried sentences.

"How is everything at the front?" whispered the Decatur's officer.

"Bad enough," answered the visitor. "I don't see how things could be worse. We are completely hemmed in by sharpshooters, more are coming in every hour, and there is at least a quarter of a mile of fallen timber before us. We can't stir, and we've got to have help this very night. Now, take me to the captain, please. I've got dispatches for him which are made out in duplicate, and he must send them to Sherman without a moment's delay."

The officer of the deck complied with the request, and then came back to his post and told Chips and Ned Marsh what the visitor had said to him.

"Duplicate dispatches, eh?" muttered Chips. "That means that two of our ship's company are going to get disagreeable orders before they are many minutes older. The admiral thinks it is going to be a ticklish piece of business to get word to Sherman tonight, and so he sends two dispatches, hoping that if one of them is captured or lost, the other may wriggle through."

The carpenter had hardly ceased speaking when the captain's clerk, breathless and excited, came up the stairs in two jumps, closely followed by the orderly. The former was bare headed, and it was against the law for any one to come upon the quarter deck unless he was properly covered; but the officer on duty did not take him to task for it as he would have done under almost any other circumstances.

"Oh, boys!" exclaimed the clerk, at the same time laying his hand on Marsh's shoulder, "here's the very mischief to pay. We are going to leave our bones up here, sure pop."

"What do you mean by that, and what do you want of me?" demanded Marsh.

"The captain wants to see you. You've got to go and hunt up Sherman. We are ordered to get ready to blow up the ship."

"No!" exclaimed his three auditors in a breath.

"Yes, we are. The admiral has sent word to the captain that he is surrounded by the enemy on all sides, that he can't handle his boats without exposing his men to certain death, and that he's going to send the whole fleet to kingdom come before he will let it fall into the hands of the enemy. This is what comes of trying to take gunboats overland."

Ned Marsh waited to hear no more, but started

post haste for the captain's cabin. He took a very white face in there with him. He was nobody's coward—he had been twice promoted for gallantry in action—but he wished his commander had selected some one else to take one of those dispatches down to General Sherman.

"Sit down, Mr. Marsh," said the captain, whose face wore an expression of anxiety and distress that the young officer had never seen there before. "Mr. Andrews will be in in a moment."

"So my chum Bob is in for it, too, is he?" thought Marsh. "I am glad to hear it. Bob is a fellow of good judgment and undoubted courage, and if I am unlucky enough to get into trouble, he may be able to go through."

Young Marsh seated himself in the chair that was pointed out to him, and waited impatiently for his captain and the visiting officer to go on with the conversation which they had brought to a close when he came in; but they seemed to have nothing further to say to each other. The expression on the captain's face told him, in plain language, that affairs at the front were quite as bad as the clerk said they were.

In a few minutes the door opened again, and another white faced young officer came into the cabin. This was acting ensign Andrews, in whose courage and judgment Ned Marsh had so much confidence. He looked inquiringly at Marsh, and then his eyes wandered to a couple of heavily weighted official envelopes that lay upon the captain's table. These were the all important dispatches, which were to be thrown overboard, in case the bearers found themselves in danger of falling into the hands of the enemy.

"Young gentlemen," said the captain, who never wasted any words in giving an order, "here is a dangerous piece of business for you to perform. These

dispatches," laying his hand upon the weighted envelopes, "are so very important, that the admiral has instructed to send them by two different officers, starting off one half an hour in advance of the other. I have neither seen nor heard of the transports since we left them behind the day before yesterday, and they are probably ten or fifteen miles down the bayou. I shall send no crew with you, for I don't want to run the risk of losing them. We have captured a good many skiffs and dugouts since we left the river, and you will find the best of them on the afterguard, from which you can make your own selections. Of course you know what to do with these documents in case you get into trouble," he added, handing each of the boys one of the weighted envelopes. "Mr. Andrews, you will start at once; and Mr. Marsh, you will follow in half an hour. Find General Sherman before you come back. I think that is all. Good by, and good luck to you."

These young fellows held a high place in the estimation of the captain, who was a regular officer, and he was by no means as indifferent to their fate as he pretended to be. There was a suspicious moisture in his eyes when he arose from his chair to take leave of them, and there was something in the lingering grasp of his hand that thrilled them to every fiber of their being.

It seemed as though the older sailor imparted to them some of his own indomitable courage; and when they said their farewells and hurried from the cabin, it was with the firm determination that those dispatches should go through, no matter how many perils and obstacles they found in their way.

"I can only repeat the captain's words, Bob," said Ned, as he held out his hand to his friend. "Good by, and good luck to you."

"The same to yourself," replied Bob. "I would

rather go into battle this minute, than to leave the vessel and pull off down that dark bayou, but I shipped to serve my country, and if I can do it by carrying dispatches, why the old man might as well send me as to put a better fellow in danger. Good by."

As Bob said this, he seized his side arms (a belt containing his sword and revolver) and ran out to report to the officer on watch. A few seconds later Ned stood at the break of the quarter deck while a light skiff, that had been captured somewhere along the bayou, was pushed into the water, and then he saw Bob get in and pull swiftly and silently away into the darkness.

Ned had no time to be lonely or to indulge in gloomy forebodings after Bob went away, for he had matters of his own to attend to—a duty which no soldier or gunboatman ever neglects when he is called upon to go into danger. He had a letter to finish, and instructions to give regarding the disposition that was to be made of his property if he failed to return. Chips was his friend on this, as upon every other occasion, and Ned knew that he had but to hint at a wish in order to have it carried out.

"Mail the letter at the first opportunity, but hold fast to the trunk until you receive positive proof that I am dead," said the boy, earnestly. "If I am captured, I may turn up again most unexpectedly, and make a demand upon you for my clothes. It is nothing uncommon for a prisoner to escape and make his way back to his vessel, you know, and I don't want my mother to be frightened half to death unless there is some reason for it; so I say again, hold fast to the trunk as long as you can."

It soon became known among the ship's company that Bob Andrews had gone off with dispatches without stopping to bid anybody good by, and that Ned

Marsh was soon to follow him down the bayou. In less time than it takes to tell it, the latter's little stateroom was crowded with sympathizing friends and messmates, who wanted to shake him by the hand and give him a word of encouragement. Chips kept close watch of the deck, and presently saw the orderly come up and report six bells — eleven o'clock.

"Very good," replied the officer. "But don't make it so."

The usual command, for every hour except meridian, is: "Make it so;" that is, "go forward and strike the ship's bell so that every one on board may know what time it is." But on this particular night the order given was: "*Don't* make it so." The officer was pacing the deck with nothing but the empty hammock nettings to protect him, and he knew that the very first stroke of the deep toned bell on the turret would bring a shower of bullets about his ears. He had heard so many of them during the last few hours, that he was glad to be allowed a short breathing spell.

"Time's up, boys," said Ned, jumping to his feet. "Take good care of yourselves, and look to see Bob and me come back with another stripe around our sleeves."

Accompanied by all his friends Ned ran down the stairs that led to the after guard, and laid his hand upon a light dugout which he had helped capture the day before. Chips protested that the cranky little thing would spill him out before he was fairly away from the side, but the boy was so determined to have his own way in the matter that his friends finally put the canoe into the water for him, and saw him glide away out of their sight.

CHAPTER III.

LOST IN THE SWAMP.

A CELEBRATED naval commander, in commenting upon a very dangerous but exceedingly brilliant exploit that had been successfully performed by one of the officers of his fleet, made use of this remarkable language:

"Other men are wanted for similar deeds of valor. The rewards are sure. They are honor, fame, promotion and death."

Ned Marsh thought of these words as he turned the bow of his dugout away from the vessel and sent it flying off into the darkness, and wondered which of these rewards would fall to the lot of himself and his friend, Bob Andrews.

When his canoe shot into the first bend in the bayou Ned faced about and took a long, lingering look at the spot where the noble vessel, which had been his home ever since he put on the "honored blue," was lying at her moorings. The darkness was so intense that he could not see the faintest outline of her. She seemed to be shut off from him by a solid wall of ebony, and the young officer strained his eyes in the vain effort to pierce through it.

In front of him the same black wall loomed up. There was no moon, the night was cloudy and starless, and, to make matters worse, the thick branches of the trees, which grew on each side of the narrow channel, were closely entwined overhead, forming a

natural arbor so dense and matted that the rays of a vertical sun could scarcely penetrate it.

Knowing the full value of the precious document he carried in his pocket, Ned laid out all his strength on his paddle, and, somewhat to his surprise, he never encountered a single obstacle. If there was any in his path some unseen power turned his canoe away from it.

During the two hours that followed he did not once pause to take breath.

The current in the bayou was sluggish, backed up as it was by the high water in the Mississippi, but still it helped him along a little, and finally Ned began to ask himself why he did not hear a challenge from some sentry. He was positive that he had come between ten and fifteen miles since he left the Decatur, and a peremptory command to halt would have been a cheering sound to his ears just then, but he listened in vain to hear it. He knew that he could not have passed the transports in the dark, because the bayou was so narrow that he could not run by them.

"Can it be possible that I have lost my way?" thought Ned, the cold chills creeping all over him. "If I have, good by, Decatur; good by, home and mother, and everything else that is worth living for."

And if he failed to get through, and something happened to prevent Bob Andrews from giving his dispatch into General Sherman's hands, what would become of the gunboats and their helpless crews?

Ned fairly gasped for breath when this inquiry forced itself upon him, and his paddle bent under the increased strain he put upon it. But with all his great anxiety and nervousness he did not forget to be very cautious in his movements.

His paddle rose and fell with noiseless, measured

stroke, and his boat glided through the water with scarcely a ripple disturbing the surface; but silent as his progress was, it was detected.

Loud and long, and with startling suddenness, the bay of a hound arose upon the air. In the deep hush of night the melodious notes sounded forth with as much volume as those of a steam whistle.

Ned Marsh could remember the time, and it was not so very long ago either, when he thought the voice of a hound was the sweetest music in the world; but he did not think so now. It made him tremble in every limb, for it told him that there was danger near.

At the moment the watchful hound gave tongue the canoe glided past a point of bushes, which grew in water so deep that Ned could not touch the bottom with his paddle to check his headway, and out into an open space about twenty yards long, at whose farther end were the smoldering remains of a camp fire.

It had almost burned itself away; but still the coals that were left threw out light enough to enable Ned to see that there were four men lying beside the fire, and that the fifth had raised himself to a sitting posture, and was rubbing his eyes, preparatory to waking up.

The man was a Confederate soldier; there was no doubt of that in Ned's mind, for he could see the fire light shining on the buttons of his jacket.

To stop where he was meant capture, and to go on meant something worse, the boy told himself, for he did not see how he could get by that clear space without being discovered; but the latter was the only course that was open to him, and he determined to try it, hoping to accomplish his object before the man got his eyes open.

He made three swift, noiseless strokes with his

paddle, and then drew it in and laid his hand upon his revolver. Under the impetus thus given to it the canoe shot ahead, and, after a few seconds of suspense, Ned wound his arms around a tree on the opposite side of the glade, and held himself there.

He was afraid to go on till that man had gone to sleep again; for there were no bushes to conceal him, and the trees grew so far apart that it would be an easy matter for even an indifferent marksman to pick him off as he moved among them.

But Ned Marsh knew that the majority of the men who wore gray jackets were anything but poor shots with the rifle. He had learned that their aim was fatally accurate, and it was not his intention to run any risks.

He kept his canoe stationary by holding fast to the tree, and took good care to keep his brass buttons out of sight behind it.

All this while the hound continued to give tongue lustily, and now three or four companions joined in with him, although they did not know which way to look to find the object their leader was barking at. By their united efforts all the men in camp were at last brought to a sitting posture.

"I wonder if those are some of the hounds that are used to hunt our poor fellows who try to escape from Shreveport and Tyler," said Ned to himself. "If they are, I would like to put a ball into the last one of them; and if they are," he added, a moment later, trembling all over with excitement and alarm, "I have stumbled upon some of the very worst men in the rebel army."

"What in the name of sense and Tom Walker is the matter with the dogs?" growled one of the men who had just been awakened. "They haven't got on the trail of a Yank, have they?"

"No, I reckon not," answered one of his com-

panions, getting up to mend the fire, an action on his part that caused the listening Ned no little uneasiness. "We ain't a hunting Yanks now, for we can get enough of that up in Tennessee. We're after bear and nothing else. Bogus scented a coon, most likely."

When Ned heard these words, and saw the preparations the campers made to go to sleep again after silencing the hounds, he told himself he understood the situation perfectly.

They were all soldiers—their uniforms showed that—but they had come home on leave of absence to see their friends and go bear hunting.

At any other time Ned Marsh, who was an enthusiastic young sportsman, would have been glad of an invitation to join them; but just now he wanted them to go to sleep, and leave him at liberty to find his way back to the bayou and down to the transports.

He was fully satisfied by this time that he was lost. The camp fire was on the right bank of the bayou, and when he came along there on board the Decatur a few hours before, he took note of the fact that there was not a foot of dry land to be seen in that direction.

It followed, then, as a matter of course, that he had left the Rolling Fork (that was the name of the bayou in which the fleet was tied up for the night), and turned into one of the numerous little streams that branch off from it in every direction, and there he was, on the borders of an extensive swamp, with darkness all about him, with not a single familiar landmark to guide him in his search for the transports, and with a fair prospect of falling into the hands of the enemy as soon as daylight came to reveal his presence to them.

"I am not caught yet, but for fear that I may be, I will just take this dispatch out of my pocket and

place it on the bottom of my canoe, so fashion," thought Ned, suiting the action to the word. "Then when I am summoned to come ashore and give myself up, I can jump to my feet in alarm, capsize the boat, and the dispatches will go down among the catfish and gars, while Ned Marsh will take a trip to Texas. Now, then, are those men ever going to sleep, I wonder?"

The campers seemed in no hurry to do so. They were wide awake now, their fire was burning brightly, and they sat up to see it burn, composedly smoking their pipes and conversing in low tones, while Ned hugged his tree and listened to the beating of his own heart.

If they saw his canoe, and Ned did not see how they could help it if they made any use whatever of their eyes, they probably took it for a log which had come down with the current and got stranded there.

At length, to the young officer's immense relief, the campers sought their blankets, one after the other, and in fifteen minutes more they were fast asleep again.

Then Ned let go his hold upon the tree, placed the blade of his paddle against it, and with one strong push sent his canoe out into the current, which took it into its grasp and carried it slowly out of the light of the camp fire.

That danger was passed, but where in the wide world was he, and which way should he go to find the transports?

CHAPTER IV.

NED MEETS A FRIEND.

In blissful ignorance of the dangers he was running into, Ned Marsh continued to ply his paddle vigorously, pausing now and then to listen, and to renew his vain efforts to see through the thick darkness which concealed even the nearest objects from his view. If he had not been blessed with uncommon nerve, his courage would have given way utterly under the crushing sense of desolation and hopelessness that weighed upon him. He was tired and hungry, and began to feel the need of rest.

"I don't think I had better go ahead in this blind way any longer," thought he. "I am only exhausting myself to no good purpose, and perhaps it would be a good plan to save the little strength I have left for a possible emergency. I believe I'll tie up and wait for daylight."

With this object in view Ned paddled to the side of the bayou and presently found a tree, to which the painter was quickly made fast. He did not intend to go asleep—he did not think it would be possible under the circumstances. He sat there in the darkness with his revolver in his hand, longing for daylight, and listening and hoping in vain, and then he sank back upon the bottom of the canoe, and in two seconds more became oblivious of all surrounding things.

He slumbered peaceably for hours, and at last

opened his eyes to find that it was broad daylight, and started up to discover, to his no small amazement and alarm, that there was another canoe in the bayou, close alongside of him. Its solitary occupant was an old gray headed negro, who gazed at him with eyes that seemed ready to start from their sockets. Scarcely realizing what he was doing, for he was not yet fully awake, Ned snatched his revolver and leveled it at the black man's head.

"Hi yi!" ejaculated the latter, in frightened tones, at the same time raising his paddle in front of his face, as if he hoped its thin blade would afford him some protection from the deadly bullet. "Luff dat thing down, moss'r, please sar. What for you wan' go and shoot ole Sam?"

(I have heard a good many plantation darkies talk, but I never yet heard one of them say "massa." If the word is pronounced alone, it is always "moss'r;" if it is followed by a Christian name, it is contracted to "moss'," as "Moss' John, Moss' Tom, and so on.)

Having got his wits about him by this time, the young officer promptly lowered the threatening weapon. He had not the least intention of injuring the old negro, for he well knew that help, if it came to him at all, must come through people of his class.

"Say, moss'r, what you doing sleeping dar, wid de gray backs all around hyar?" exclaimed the negro, who felt safer when he saw the revolver disappear behind the side of the canoe. "You mighty foolish Yankee, I tell you dat for a fac'."

"I am here because I can't help myself," answered Ned. "I—I think that perhaps I have got a little out of my reckoning. I couldn't see where to go in the dark, and so I stopped to wait for daylight. This is Rolling Fork, I suppose?"

"Dis hyar!" exclaimed the negro, showing the whites of his eyes in amazement. "No, sar. Rolling Fork twenty miles off dat a way," he added, pointing in a direction opposite to the one Ned had been following for the last few hours. "Whar you think you wan' go, anyhow?"

"I want to go to Rolling Fork," answered the young officer, who had never felt so lonely and forsaken as he did when he heard the negro confirm his worst suspicions. "You can show me the way there, can't you?"

"Not for no money in dis wide world, moss'r!" exclaimed old Sam, who seemed terribly frightened by the mere mention of such a thing. "De rebbels all around dar now, shooting at de gunboats. Ketch ole Sam, and make him go for a mule whacker, or work in de trenches. Sam too ole for dat kind of business, moss'r, and he don't like de rebbels nohow. Sam Union to de backbone."

"Then you ought to be willing to help a Union man when he is in trouble," said Ned, who thought seriously of compelling the darky, at the muzzle of his revolver, to take him back and show him where Rolling Fork was. It is probable that he would have done so, had it not been for an unexpected interruption that occurred before he had got his plans fully matured.

"What have you got in there?" Ned went on, pointing to a bundle that lay in the bottom of the negro's canoe. "If it is anything good to eat, trot some of it out, for I am almost famished."

The negro's canoe was loaded with provisions, and he quickly complied with the hungry officer's command to "trot some out." Ned grew hungrier than ever as his gaze rested upon the good things that were disclosed to view when old Sam threw off the snow white cloth that covered the bundle.

There were two huge "pones" of corn bread, which had doubtless been baked in a Dutch oven; as many roasted chickens, and a whole side of bacon; a big pail of milk, and a peck or more of sweet potatoes.

"No man ever put up that lunch," said Ned. "It's a woman's work. Where did it come from, and where are you taking it?"

"My missus done put it up, an' tole me to tote it down to her boy—my young Moss' Luke," answered the negro. "I reckon you call dis mighty good grub, don't you? You jes' oughter been down hyar 'fore de wah come," added ole Sam, as he proceeded to cut off and butter a generous slice from one of the "pones." "We don't have nuffin' now like we used to have 'fore de g'rillas done come and stole everything from us."

"The guerrillas!" repeated Ned. "Why, they are your own people. They didn't steal from you."

"Oh, yes dey did, moss'r," the negro insisted. "Done took everything 'cepting what young Moss' Luke run off and hid in de cane. Hab dis leg of chicken, too, sah. Buttermilk or sweet milk, sah? I don't reckon Moss' Luke will car'."

"Well, I don't reckon it will make much difference whether he cares or not," said Ned, speaking as plainly as a mouthful of corn bread and chicken would permit. "Luke is in the trenches at Vicksburg, of course, and you are taking this grub down to him. Consequently it will be my duty to confiscate it for the good of the service. Now, uncle, strike out and show me the way to Rolling Fork. Don't waste any time in argument, but go on. I am in a great hurry."

"Wha-wha-wha' you talkin' 'bout, boy?" exclaimed Sam, as soon as he recovered from his amazement. "Dey done conscripted ole Moss'r Bennett

an' de bigges' boy into de army, but Moss Luke, he much too smart for 'em. He done run off and hide in de cane, and de rebbels couldn't cotch him. Moss' Luke jes' as good a Union man as you be, and so is de rest of de family. Dey wouldn't like for ole Sam to go up to de Rolling Fork to be tooken into de army to whack mules and dig in de trenches, kase den who could tote de letters and grub to young Moss' Luke? He can't come home 'cepting now and then once in a great while, kase de g'rillas would cotch him sure; and ole Sam, he have to do all de business."

When this conversation first began, the old negro had brought his boat around, with the bow pointing up stream, and he was now keeping it stationary by holding fast to Ned's canoe, which was still tied to the tree. While he was speaking, Ned noticed that he was always on the alert. From the force of habit, probably, he kept his eyes roaming about among the trees, and occasionally he would bend down so that he could see a longer way through them. This he did while protesting against Ned's order. When he ceased speaking he straightened up like a jack-in-the-box, and seized his paddle with hands that trembled visibly.

"De good Lawd, look down on us poor miserable niggers! Dar they come dis blessed minute," said he, in a frightened whisper.

"They? Who?" demanded Ned, involuntarily lowering his own voice.

"De rebbels. Look a dar," replied the negro, pointing up the bayou with his paddle.

Ned looked, and saw two or three boats moving about among the trees. The men who handled them were all dressed in gray, and there were brass buttons on their coats.

CHAPTER V.

LEFT TO HIS FATE.

"I KNOW dat fustest man, and he's de bigges' rebel in Mississip," whispered the negro, who was so badly frightened that he could not talk plainly. "Ole Sam gone up now for a fac'! He'll have to whack de army mules and break his ole back a dinning wid a shovel, suah."

"Well, I am not gone up yet," whispered Ned, in reply. "I am going to run, and if you know a place of safety, I want you to take me to it. Be quick and still. They haven't seen us, and we may get away before they can pull on us."

As Ned spoke, he cast off the painter with which his canoe was tied to the tree, and with one sweep of his paddle turned the little craft around, and headed her down the bayou. The movement brought Sam to his senses, and at the same time put a little life and energy into him. Seeing that he would be left to face the rebels alone if he did not bestir himself, he quickly brought his own boat around, and so vigorously did he ply the paddle with his sinewy old arms, that he soon put himself in front of Ned; but he did not attempt to run away from him.

"Stick close to your Uncle Sam, and he'll take care of you," said he, in low, excited tones. "Moss' Luke wouldn't like for me to drap you hyar for dem rebbels to cotch. If I do dat, he jaw ole Sam, suah."

Better hiding places than these swamps afforded, at the time of which I write, could not have been found anywhere in the country. The trees, which grew as close together as they do in any piece of woods on your grandfather's farm, were thickly festooned with mosses and climbing plants, and the wood colored canoes of the fugitives looked so much like the logs that were floating along with the current, or lying stranded on the snags, that it would have been an easy matter for them to escape discovery if they could have remained at rest. But dim as the light was in the deep recesses of the forest, it was reflected from the dripping blades of their paddles, and that betrayed them to the sharp eyes of the same watchful hound which had warned his master when Ned Marsh incautiously approached his camp fire. Once more his deep toned bay rang in the young officer's ears like the knell of death.

"Pull, moss'r," whispered the negro, looking back over his shoulder. "Dey begin to bang wid their guns purty soon."

"And they are dead shots, too," replied Ned.

"Well, the bushes right hyar," said the negro, who had turned out of the bayou and was scudding off over the country at a surprising rate of speed. "Can't see us after we get behind de bushes."

Just then a hail from the rear told them that the men in gray had discovered them.

"You Sam!" shouted the leader, after silencing the hound, so that he could make himself heard. "You Sam, what are you running off that way for? Hold up, or I'll send a bullet after you. There's two of them," he added, a moment later, "and if the other fellow hasn't got a blue uniform on, I'm a nigger myself."

"A Yank!" shouted one of his companions. "He's a spy! Catch him!"

"Or a bearer of dispatches," said another. "Shoot him, before he can throw his papers overboard!"

Although the men in gray tried their best to carry out both these suggestions, their efforts were unsuccessful. The bushes of which Sam had spoken were close at hand, and before the pursuers could catch up their guns, the fugitives were out of sight. The bullets and buckshot tore through their frail protection and splintered the bark from the trees, but none of the missiles struck them, although old Sam had a very narrow escape, one of the bullets passing through the side of his canoe. His eyes rolled with fright, but he did not cease his exertions at the paddle.

When the rebels came up, he and Ned were not to be seen; and when they gave over looking for them two hours later, they had pushed their canoes so far into the cane two miles away, that a regiment of men might have searched for them in vain.

"I say, Uncle Sam," exclaimed Ned, taking off his cap and mopping his flushed face with his handkerchief, "it's a lucky thing for us that this country is all under water. If it were not, those rebels could use their hounds to trail us."

"Dat's true for a fac'," replied Sam. "Them hound dogs will trail anything, from a bar to a nigger. I knows 'em, and de men folks dat's wid 'em, too."

"I ran on to their camp last night before I knew it," said Ned, "and that same hound gave tongue in a way that made me shiver all over. Who are they, any way? I took them for a party of soldiers who are spending their furlough in hunting."

"Dat's jes' what dey is, Moss'r—Jim, did you say your name was?"

"No; you may call me Ned," answered the officer,



UNCLE SAM AND NED MARSH IN PERIL.

who thought that perhaps his sable companion would feel more at his ease, if he knew how to address him.

"Wal, dat's what dey come for," continued the negro, "to hunt bar and see their folks, and do all kinds and sorts of meanness to their neighbors who don't think jes' as they do."

"Do you mean to say that there are any Union people around here besides the darkies?" inquired Ned, who, like a good many of the rest of us, thought that every man who wore a gray jacket must of necessity be a rebel at heart.

"I do, for a fac'," answered Sam, earnestly. "There's heaps and stacks of jes' as good Union folks in Mississip as ever you dare be, Moss' Ned. But I can't talk to you 'bout dat, kase I'se a nigger, and I don't know much; but I'll take you to my young Moss' Luke's hide out as soon as it comes dark, and he will tell you a heap of things."

"Must I stay here until dark?" exclaimed Ned, who wondered what would become of the gunboats in the meantime, if Bob Andrews had not already succeeded in getting through with his dispatches. "I wouldn't have had this happen for anything. It may prove to be a terrible piece of work for me, but I don't see how I could have avoided it. Do you think your master will be willing to act as my guide to Rolling Fork?"

"No, sar, I don't," replied the negro, emphatically. "You see, the Johnnies is conscripting everybody, from de little boy, jes' big enough to tote a shooting iron, up to de ole man what ain't got strength enough to tote himself, let alone a gun, and dey's been trying for a long time to get a holt of Moss' Luke and de four young fellers dat's wid him. Moss' Luke won't go no nigher to Vicksburg dan he is now, I bet you."

Ned was very much disappointed to hear this, for, late as it was, he still cherished the hope that he might deliver his dispatches in time to be of some service to the beleaguered men on board the gunboats. But it was useless to think of making an attempt to find the general, now that that hunting party had found out that he was hiding somewhere in the swamp. Knowing that he had important papers in his possession, Ned believed that they would let the bears rest in peace for a while, and draw a bee line for Rolling Fork, with the intention of capturing him when he tried to deliver those papers.

"Well," said Ned, with a long drawn sigh of resignation, "it is useless for me to cry over what I can't help. I think I had better get some sleep while I can. Tomorrow I may be dead or a prisoner."

"No, sar," said the negro again. "Trust to your Uncle Sam, Moss' Ned, trust to your Uncle Sam. You go to sleep now, and he will take care of you."

With the utmost confidence in the negro's loyalty, Ned wrapped his boat cloak around him, lay down in his canoe, and, with his dispatches under his head for a pillow, sank into the land of dreams.

And how fared it with Bob Andrews all this while? By some extraordinary streak of good luck, such as might not have attended him again in a hundred years, he kept his skiff in the bayou, without once wandering away into any of the little streams that branched off from it, and in due time he was halted by a sentry stationed at the forecastle of the leading transport. His dispatches were given into the hands of the officer for whom they were intended, and in less than a quarter of an hour afterward, the steamer was trying to force her way up Black Bayou in the direction of Rolling Fork.

But it was slow and tedious work, for the pilot did not know the channel, and the night was so dark that he could not see where he was going. Becoming impatient at last, and perhaps urged on by something he heard Bob Andrews tell one of his staff regarding the perilous situation of the gunboats, the general ordered the troops to disembark and push forward on foot.

They floundered through the overflow to the ridge before spoken of, along which they lighted their way with candles carried in their hands. With infinite difficulty they marched a mile and a half that night, and then went into camp until morning. By noon the next day they had covered twenty one miles more, scattered the sharpshooters like chaff before the wind, and saved the fleet. While Ned Marsh was slumbering there in the cane, the Decatur was backed out of the bayou toward the Mississippi, leaving him to his fate.

Bob Andrews, with tears in his eyes, reported that Ned had not been seen on board the general's transport, and then they knew that one of three things had happened to him He was either lost, killed or captured.

Rough old Chips was almost heart broken. The missing officer was a great favorite with him, as indeed he was with every one on board the vessel.

CHAPTER VI.

A GREETING IN THE DARK.

It seemed to Ned Marsh that he had scarcely closed his eyes when a hand was laid gently on his shoulder, and old Sam's voice whispered in his ear:

"Time to wake up, now, moss'r. Take a little bite of something to eat and a good drink of milk, and den we will go and find Moss' Luke. Hi, yi! won't he open his eyes when he sees a live Yankee come up to his hide out?"

It was pitch dark again, and at first the young officer did not know where he was. He could not see the negro or his canoe; but he managed to find the bread and chicken and the cup of milk that Sam was trying to put into his hands, and he was quite hungry enough to dispose of them.

"How far is Luke's hide out from here?" asked Ned, who wondered how many more hours he would have to pass in that intense darkness before he could see the face of a white man again.

"Wal, it's a right smart piece," was Sam's reply.

"Is it a mile?"

"I reckon so, sar."

"Is it five miles?"

"Mebbe it is, sar."

Ned saw very plainly that it was of no use to try to get any information out of Sam.

The latter did not intend that even a Union gunboatman should gain the faintest idea regarding the locality of that hide out, if he could help it.

Ned admired him for his loyalty to his young master. He said no more until he had finished his bread and milk, and then he passed back the empty cup and announced that he was ready to start.

The first thing the negro did was to take Ned's painter and make it fast to a ring in the stern of his own canoe. This was to prevent them from becoming separated in the darkness, and the young officer was glad that Sam thought of it, for even after he got out of the cane into the open swamp he could not see the nearest trees. Sam must have had owl's eyes in his head, Ned told himself, for although the canoes grazed some of the trees as they passed, they did not come in actual contact with a single one of them. At the end of half an hour the negro said:

"Now, Moss' Ned, you stay right hyar till you see me agin. I must ax Moss' Luke what he thinks 'bout my bringing you to his hide out. I'll be back d'rectly."

While Sam was speaking he cast off the painter that held the two boats together, and moved away so silently that Ned did not hear the dip of his paddle; but in a few minutes he heard something else that told him which way his sable friend had gone. It was a perfect imitation of the bark of a red squirrel. It was faint and far off, and so was the answer, which came to his ears a moment later. Another half hour passed away, and then Ned was startled by hearing a voice, almost at his elbow, saying:

"Is you dar, Moss' Gunboat?"

How Sam had managed to find his way through that dark and trackless swamp back to the very tree where he had left him was something the young officer could not understand. He replied that he *was* there; whereupon another voice said, in well modulated and courteous tone:

"I bid you welcome, sir, to this most inhospitable country. I can't see you, but there is my hand, if you can find it."

Ned did find it after a while, and he knew by the hearty grip it gave his own that he had found another friend.

"My name is Luke Bennett," continued the newcomer; "and it may put you at your ease to know that I am hiding in this swamp to keep from going into the rebel army. It is enough for me to know that you are in trouble and want help, and it is none of my business what brought you out here. But I should judge that you were sent on detached duty of some sort, and that you got bewildered among these bayous."

"That's just it," replied Ned. "I am very anxious to see one of our officers, to whom I have an important communication to make. Can you show me the way to Rolling Fork?"

"I am sorry to say that I cannot," replied Ned's invisible friend. "Even Sam could not find his way through in the dark, and it would be as much as our lives are worth to attempt to go there in the daytime. The hunting party, that Sam tells me you had an adventure with this morning, is made up of a bad lot of citizens, who will leave no stone unturned to effect the capture of myself and companions, and we dare not show ourselves abroad until their leaves of absence expire and they go back to the army. The only thing you can do is to remain my unwilling guest until the way is clear, and then I will take you back to your friends again, if there is any possible chance for me to do it. I will feed you well and take good care of you."

Ned Marsh was disappointed again; but there seemed to be nothing for him to do but to accept the invitation thus freely and cordially given. He

said as much, at the same time expressing his hearty thanks for his new friend's kindness and courtesy.

"Of course that's understood," answered Luke Bennett. "Some writers say that our good acts spring from selfishness, and I am free to confess that it has a good deal to do with my invitation. I am sorry that you are in trouble, but glad that you will have to stay with us for a spell. My friends and I get very lonely, hiding here as we do, like so many hunted wolves; and the sight of a new face, and the sound of a strange voice, provided, of course, that the face and the voice do not belong to a Johnny, are always welcome to us."

"Do you mean to say that you have visitors?" inquired Ned, bending over to assist Sam, whose hands were moving along the bottom of the canoe searching for the painter. "I shouldn't think they could find you in this swamp."

"They can, and they do frequently," said Luke, with a light laugh. "You see, we keep a station on the underground railroad. We don't assist negroes to get over to Canada, as you Northern people did before the war, but we help all the deserters we see, who are tired of army life, and want to go home. Are you made fast, Sam? Then come on. The boys will get uneasy if we don't show up pretty soon."

Ned Marsh was profoundly astonished by the turn affairs had taken, and if he had only been sure that Bob Andrews had taken his dispatches through in safety, and that General Sherman's troops had gone to the relief of the gunboats, he would have felt perfectly at his ease.

He had often told himself that the South must have been a pleasant country to live in before the war, because he there found something that he had never before seen or heard of—a refined and cul-

tured society, with an abundance of game, both large and small, almost within sight of the doors of aristocratic homes. Of course there was more ignorance among the masses than there was in the North, for there was not a single State in rebellion that had a system of common schools worthy the name; but the well-to-do people were, as a rule, educated.

Luke Bennett, if one might judge by the language he used in conversation, had not only enjoyed exceptional educational privileges, but had made the most of them. He talked like a Northern boy, and with good reason, too, for he had received most of his schooling in the Empire State.

Ned Marsh was not at all averse to camping out for a while, seeing that he could not help himself; and he was glad to learn that among his companions there would be at least one boy who knew as much of the world and of books as he did himself. Although he had not seen even the outlines of Luke Bennett's face and figure, Ned thought he could give a pretty good description of him.

For ten or fifteen minutes silence reigned, broken only by the occasional splash of a paddle; and then a continuous grating along the side of his canoe, accompanied by several sharp blows in the face, told Ned that he was being towed into another canebrake. It was a long way through it, but the other side was reached at last, and then Ned found himself standing on dry ground for the first time in twenty four hours, and in full glare of a cheerful camp fire.

The moment the bow of his boat grated on the bottom, it was seized by ready hands, which pulled it high upon the bank, while others were extended to help him ashore. As he had forgotten to tell Luke what his name was, he was obliged to introduce himself.

"My name is Edward Marsh, and I am acting ensign on board the gunboat Decatur," said he. "I am sorry to be here, for I have left a most important duty undone; but since I am here, I am glad to meet you."

Ned's reception could not have been more cordial and friendly, and it had the effect of putting him at his ease at once. He seated himself on the rude camp chair that was placed in front of the fire for his accommodation, and then turned to look at the leader of this little party of refugees, to whom he felt himself drawn in some unaccountable way.

He was just such a fellow as Ned imagined him to be, after hearing his voice in the dark. He did not appear to be more than seventeen years old, but he was as tall as a man, as straight as an arrow, and his broad shoulders seemed to indicate that he possessed plenty of strength.

He walked with a springy step, and was as quick as a cat in his movements. His features were finely cut, his face was as brown as an Indian's, and his long black hair, curling at the ends, fell down upon his shoulders. He was dressed in a complete suit of butternut, which was patched in several places, but he wore it with the air of a prince. He did not look like a boy who would run from his own shadow, and Ned told himself that if Luke was afraid to go to Rolling Fork, he did not want to go there, either.

CHAPTER VII.

LUKE BENNETT AND HIS FRIENDS.

Of course Luke Bennett and his four friends were quite as much interested in Ned Marsh as the latter was in them. The young officer could see that they were almost bursting with curiosity to learn how he came to be wandering about the swamp so far away from his vessel, but they were much too polite to pry into the matter, and so Ned told his story without waiting to be questioned.

"We knew that you were going to get into trouble when we heard that you were going up there," said Luke, when Ned ceased speaking. "But those gunboats do make a fearful fight, don't they?"

"I suppose you think you are going to get Vicksburg now, don't you?" said Tom Pike, who sat on the opposite side of the fire.

"We could not be more certain of it if we had the place in our possession at this minute," was Ned's answer. "We gunboatmen hold that the siege of Vicksburg will be the turning point of the war. It will surely be taken, and then the Confederacy will begin to fall to pieces."

"I hope, from the bottom of my heart, that you are a true prophet," said Luke Bennett, earnestly. "We five fellows have got relatives in those trenches, fighting against the old flag; but they are as good Union men as any you can find in the North. They

had their choice between going into the army and seeing their homes burned over the heads of their wives and little children. I tell you," added Luke, turning his flashing eyes full upon the young officer, "it's a cheap thing to be loyal up North, where nine out of ten people think as you do; but it costs something down here, in the heart of the Confederacy."

"I know it does," was all Ned could say.

"Yes," chimed in Joe Ramsay. "You want to know whom you are talking to before you give utterance to Union sentiments down here. Why, Duckfoot, you can have no conception of the state of things that existed right here in this neighborhood on the twelfth of April, '61, the day that Sumter was fired on. We came near having a little civil war on our own hook. More than one family, who had never known what it was to have the smallest difference of opinion, suddenly discovered that it was divided against itself, some of the members hurrying off to enlist under the 'stars and bars,' and the others holding up for the Union. Neighbors, who had always been on the most friendly terms, turned against each other quicker than a flash; the property of loyal men was seized and destroyed; and my father was given to understand that if he didn't straighten up his business and go into the army in a little less than no time, he would be hanged to the plates of his own gallery."

"The women were the worst of the lot," said one of the boys, who had not spoken before. "Of course some of them were so blue that it would rub off, but the majority were rebs clear through. If a fellow had a sweetheart, he would be told that if he wanted his love affairs to run smoothly, he must have a gray jacket on, and be all ready to go into the army the next time he came to see her. They are sorry

enough for it now, when it is too late, for they sent many a fine fellow to his death by such talk as that."

"And the last one of them is as poor as Job's turkey," said Luke. "Believing, as a good many people down here did, that one reb was as good as five Yanks, they gave everything they could spare to the army. Ryder's guerillas came along and stole what they had kept for their own use, and now they are utterly destitute. Some of them would have starved to death, had it not been for the assistance they received from the Union people whom they abused and insulted at the beginning of the war. The men who tried to capture you and Sam are not hunting for fun. They want to get a little meat for their families."

"A little while ago you called me Duckfoot," said Ned, turning to Joe. "That's what the soldiers call a gunboatman; but where did you ever hear the expression?"

"On board one of your vessels," answered Joe.

"Have you ever been on a gunboat?" exclaimed Ned.

"Of course I have; we all have. We have been fifty miles up the river to trade garden truck with them for shoes, stockings, coffee, tea, sugar and salt. The brogans I am wearing now came off the gunboat Forest Rose."

"And the shirt I have on came out of the same locker," said Luke.

The next moment all the refugees suddenly jumped to their feet, and raising their hands to enjoin silence upon Ned, bent their heads forward and stood listening intently.

For the space of two or three minutes they stood there, waiting and listening, and then with a common impulse resumed their seats—all except old

Sam, who got into his canoe without saying a word, and disappeared in the cane,

"It's Tramp," said Luke, by way of explanation, while an expression of anxiety settled on his face. "It is something unusual for him to be sent out here at this time of night, and I am afraid there is bad news for us."

"Tramp is our courier," said Joe, who saw that Ned did not yet understand the matter, and that Luke was thinking so busily about something else, that he could not go on with his explanation. "He's a hound, you know. Don't you hear him giving tongue?"

Ned listened with all his ears, but was obliged to confess that he did not.

"We all heard him very plainly, and I hear him now," continued Joe. "But you are not obliged to keep your eyes and ears open day and night, as we have been for long, weary months, and consequently you don't notice little things that attract our attention at once. Next to Uncle Sam, Tramp is the most useful member of our family. He brings us news, as often as our folks have any to send us, and is so impatient to start back with our answer, that some of us have to hold him in order to make him wait till we can write it."

"Tramp is the smartest dog I ever saw," observed Tom. "We think he belongs somewhere up the country, and that he got lost while hunting. He came to us on the day we went into the swamp, and has been with us ever since. We never thought of teaching him to carry our mail for us; he took to it of his own accord. The strangest part of the whole business is, he seems to understand the situation perfectly. Although he has averaged two trips a day between our hide out and Mr. Bennett's plantation ever since we have been here, he has never once

been seen, and that proves conclusively that he must give every one he meets a wide berth."

"But for fear that somebody will see him, he always runs with his nose close to the ground, and barks as if he were following a trail," said Frank Barron, one of the two boys who had done more listening than talking. "Our women folks have often watched him when he was starting out across the old cotton field to come here.

"Does he carry the letters in his mouth?" inquired Ned.

"No, they are tied around his neck; and as they are written on very thin paper, his long hair covers them up so that you can't see that there is anything there. It wouldn't be a safe piece of business for any stranger to try to take one of those dispatches away from him, for he is almost as big as a yearling, and would just as soon fight as eat."

"But they might shoot him, you know," said Luke; "and that is what they will do when they find out that it is through him that we keep posted in all that is going on in the settlement. You heard him that time, didn't you?" he added, as a single long drawn bay echoed through the swamp.

"I did, and I thought it sounded as though he was welcoming some one."

"And so he was. Sam has probably taken him into his canoe. Our suspense will not last long, boys. We shall very soon know why he was sent out at this hour."

A slight movement in the cane told the watchful boys that old Sam's dugout was close at hand. It came in sight a moment later, with Tramp sitting up in the bow as a figure head. He did not wait for the canoe to touch the shore, but cleared the intervening water with a mighty bound. His first move was to spring up and place his big paws on Luke's shoul-

ders, and the second to turn his head and growl savagely at Ned, whose presence he instantly detected.

"Hi, yi!" exclaimed old Sam, reproachfully. "Dat's a Union man, Tramp. What for you wan' make faces at him? I 'shamed on you, I is so."

Luke Bennett lost no time in pushing aside the wet hair on the hound's neck and taking possession of the little package he found there, wrapped up in a piece of oiled silk. Ned could see his hands tremble as he untied it; but when he had run his eye over the words that were written on the paper, he finally brought to light, he brightened up and said, cheerfully:

"Mother hasn't told us anything that we don't know already. There is nothing private in it, and so I will read it aloud. Perhaps it will give our friend Duckfoot a clearer idea of the dangers that hang over our heads than any words of mine could do."

So saying, Luke drew a camp chair nearer to the fire, smoothed the letter out on his knee and read as follows:

My Dear Boy,—Mrs. Ramsay has just ridden down to tell me that Colonel St. Clair, Captain Griffin, and two planters from the upper settlement, whose names she does not know, have returned home on a furlough, accompanied by your old enemy, Ike Bishop. They have positive evidence, so they say, that we have a large sum of money hidden somewhere in the woods, and they do not intend to go back to the army until they get it. Amos Ryder's guerrillas say the same. They made an organized raid through the settlement this morning. They stationed guards around our houses, so that we could not communicate with one another, and then sent in men who turned everything upside down in the vain effort to discover the hiding place of our valuables. They broke almost every article of furniture that was left in Mrs. Ramsay's house, tore up the floor——

"That Amos Ryder is a man I am going to shoot on sight," exclaimed Joe, who could not hold in any

longer. "The villain who treats my mother that way shall not live to pollute the earth."

"And I will leave a notice on Colonel St. Clair's doorstep, telling him that if he doesn't leave the settlement within twenty four hours after he reads it, and go back to the army where he belongs, he will return from his hunt to find his fine house a pile of ashes."

There was no bluster in all this, but there was a look of quiet determination on Luke's face and Joe's, which told Ned, in plain language, that they were terribly in earnest. Luke smoothed out the letter again, moved a little closer to the fire and went on with his reading:

They broke almost every article of furniture that was left in Mrs. Ramsay's house, tore up the floor, cut open her bed and scattered it all over the yard, and were insolent and abusive to her besides, although she has often fed the wives and children of those very men.

To come back to Colonel St. Clair and his party: They gave out that they were going into the cane to hunt bear meat for their families; but they told some of their particular friends that they want you more than they want meat, and that when they catch you they will make you tell where that money is concealed, or they will leave you hanging from a tree in the swamp.

I know that in some mysterious way you manage to keep yourselves well informed regarding everything that goes on in the settlement, and perhaps I have told you nothing new; but still I thought I had better put you on your guard. Now, dear boys, one and all, do be careful of yourselves. We pray daily and hourly that you may be kept as in the hollow of His hand, that this unhappy war may be speedily terminated, and all our absent dear ones be brought back to us in safety. Hurriedly, but lovingly, MOTHER.

When Luke read these affectionate closing words, he did as Ned Marsh had often done when his own mother wrote to him in a similar strain—he turned away his head and drew his handkerchief from his pocket. The others were equally affected, and for a few minutes there was silence in the camp. Ned wondered if Luke and Joe would hold to the resolu-

tion they made a few minutes before, and when the former spoke, he found out.

"Mother doesn't say how those ruffians treated her," said Luke, at length, "but I have every reason to believe that she did not fare any better at their hands than your mother did, Joe. Father was very outspoken in his Union sentiments, and those scoundrels St. Clair and Ryder have not forgotten it. That man has reckoned without his host if he imagines that he can come back here and work his own sweet will with people who do not believe as he does, and he will find it out before he is many hours older. He shall not stay here. Now, if one of you fellows will hold Tramp, I'll write a short answer and send him back with it. I'll tell mother that we've got a live Duckfoot here on exhibition."

As Luke said this, he turned and disappeared in a way that was utterly bewildering to Ned Marsh. He seemed to walk straight into the side of a hill that stood a short distance behind the camp fire.



CHAPTER VIII.

A NICE LITTLE PLAN.

"Good morning, Captain Ryder."

The speaker was Ike Bishop, a tall, gawky youth, of about seventeen years, who stood leaning over the little gate in front of a rambling log house. The man to whom these words were addressed, and who was riding along the road mounted on a small and very dilapidated specimen of the mule species, drew rein and returned the greeting with an awkward attempt at a military salute. The boy sported a nondescript uniform, half blue and half gray, while the man was dressed in butternut; but they both wore brass buttons on their jackets. They both had the same slouchy loose jointed frame, the same long unkempt hair, and you could have told at a glance that they belonged to that class of people known in the South as "white trash."

Captain Ryder rode up to the gate, leaned over the pommel of his saddle, and stuck out a dirty, begrimed paw to be shaken by the boy.

"Wal, I do think in my soul, Ike Bishop," said he, as soon as he had somewhat recovered from his surprise. "What brung you down here? I allowed that you were up in the Tennessee mountings a fighting of the Yanks; dog gone 'em all, I say."

"I say so too," answered Ike. "I've jest come from thar, but thar ain't no fightin' going on now, an' that's how me an' the kurn an' cap made out to

get a furlong—I mean Kurn St. Clair an' Cap Griffin."

"Be they home, too?" exclaimed Ryder. "I shall be mighty proud to shake 'em by the hand. How's everything up thar, any how? Lickin' the Yanks every time you get the chance, I reckon."

"You bet; but they don't often give us the chance. We're holdin' 'em now with a tight grip at Murfreesboro, so't they can't come down hyar an' help Grant at Vicksburg. We've been doin' good work up thar in Tennessee, but you fellows down hyar don't amount to shucks."

"Now I'll jest tell you what's a fact," exclaimed the guerrilla captain. "What's makes you say that, Ike Bishop?"

"'Cause it's the gospel truth, that's why. Hyar's all the loyal Confed'rites starving to death for grub; my mother, she ain't got no shoes to bless herself with; the cows is all lyin' out in the cane; thar ain't no men folks about to shoot hog meat for her; and hyar's you uns, ridin' round with your double barrel scatter guns, an' makin' b'lieve you're fightin' for the 'federacy; an' all the hull time these Union folks have got enough and to spare. Dog gone such fellows as you be, any way. The kurn, he's mighty mad about it, I can tell you that; an' he says he's the best notion in the world to report you to the department commander an' have your commission took away from you. He wants it give to somebody who will fly around an' do something."

"But what can we uns do?" demanded Ryder. "We 'listed to fight, an' if the Yanks will come whar we uns be, we'll lick 'em outen their boots. But you see, they know better'n to come hyar."

"You uns couldn't go where they be, I reckon, could you?" said Ike, with a grin.

"Over to Vicksburg?" cried the guerrilla captain,

"Not much. We're partisans. We 'lect our own officers, an' I'm the Swamp Fox. I named myself after General Marion, you know. I ain't 'shamed of the name either, for I've heared tell that he was a good fighter, an' that he licked the Britishers fearful."

"Yes, I've heared he did; but I don't reckon he laid round an' waited for them to come to him. He hunted 'em up, and whopped 'em every place he could find 'em. If I'd been captain of such a company of men as you've got, I would have been rich long before this time. Why, man, thar's a fortune right hyar in this settlement."

"Whar is it?" demanded Ryder. "I know as well as you do, that thar's lots of gold and silver hid about these diggings, but I'd like to see you or anybody else find it."

"Wal, I'll bet you that St. Clair an' Griffin will find it before they go back to the army," said Ike, decidedly. "They told me that that's one thing that they come hum for. Hyar you uns have been fiddlin' round for 'most two years, and you ain't a cent better off than you were when the war first begun. Have you uns ever searched Bennett's house, or Ramsay's, or Barron's? I'll bet a hoss you ain't. Good laws! If I had only had my company hyar for a little while, I'd show you uns how we'd pound music outen them fine pianners with the butts of our carbines."

"I wonder would the kurn take a holt an' help me if I should do it today," said Ryder, who began to think that perhaps he had been remiss in his duty. "I don't like to pester them that a way, 'cause they're my neighbors, an' they *have* give my women folks a bite to eat now an' then. I'll say that much for 'em, if they do side with the Yanks. Would the kurn take a holt, do you think?"

"No, I don't reckon he would, 'cause why, he's got to go back to the army when his furlong gives out, an' thar's them five fellers loose in the swamps. He's too good a soldier, the kurn is, to leave an enemy in the rear; an' I don't reckon he'll keer to pester Luke's mother, for fear that Luke will get even with him in some way the minit his back is turned."

"An' can't he get even with we uns too?" demanded Ryder.

"You uns!" exclaimed Ike, in a tone of disgust. "The hull kit an' bilin' of you ain't got five cents' worth of property to lose."

"Wal, I reckon the little we have got is worth as much to us, as Kurnel St. Clair's fine house is to him," said Ryder, indignantly.

"An' you're right hyar on the ground to look out for it, ain't you? If the kurn was goin' to stay to hum, I tell you, he would make things lively for them five fellers that's layin' around in the swamp, hidin' out when they oughter be fightin' for the 'federacy."

"Now, thar's a p'int that I have often wanted to speak to somebody about," remarked Captain Rider, after a short pause. "You have been in the army an' can tell me all about it. What did them Yanks come down hyar with foot an' critter fellers to fight we uns for? That's what gets ahead of my time. We uns never done nothin' to them—not the fust thing."

"What are *you* fightin' for?" inquired Ike.

"'Cause I ain't a goin' to let myself be whopped; that's why."

"Wal, the Yanks are fightin' for our niggers," said Ike. "They say that they are jest as good as we be, an' that we ain't got no right to make them work for us. They want 'em to be free, and that's what made 'em sot the war a goin'."

"Wal, I do think in my soul!" exclaimed Ryder, who had never had the matter explained to him before. "Why, the niggers would starve to death if they didn't have a master to look out for them."

"That's what I say," replied Ike. "I'd like powerful well to have the war tooken up North, so't them Yanks can see how good it feels to have their houses burned up, their critters all killed or carried away to feed the army, an' their women folks goin' without grub to eat, but I'd like a heap better to be the means of makin' that Luke Bennett an' the fellers that's with him trot out the money they have been hidin' from us so long. You've got the power in your own hands, an' I don't see why you don't use it. All the best people in the settlement would stand by you."

"I will use it this very day," said Captain Ryder, with emphasis. "A man who says a nigger's as good as I be, shan't keep no gold laying round whar I can get my hands onto it, I bet you. Who's them comin' thar?"

"It's Kurnel St. Clair, Cap'n Griffin an' two planters from the upper settlement, who come hum on a furlong the same time I did," answered Ike. "We're goin' out after that bar meat now, which means Luke Bennett an' the money he's got hid in the swamp."

It was the sudden appearance of four men in gray uniforms, who came riding down the lane, that turned the conversation into this channel. To make the settlers believe that they were a hunting party, and nothing else, they brought with them four hounds, and among them was the one that gave Ned Marsh so much uneasiness.

One could see at a glance that these men belonged to a better, and consequently more dangerous class of citizens than Captain Ryder and Ike Bishop did.

They were intelligent men, who went into the war with their eyes open, and knowing full well that the object of it was to establish a separate republic whose corner stone should be slavery. The reason why they did not take more pains to explain the situation to such fellows as Ryder and Ike was because they did not consider them worth the trouble, and besides, they did not think the "white trash" had brains enough to understand it. All they asked of them was to fight their battles; and how well they did it history shows. They returned the military salutes that were given them as they rode up, got off their horses and asked Ike if the boats were ready.

"The canoes have been down thar in the bayou waitin' for you uns all the mornin'," was Ike's reply. "Say, kurnel, can't we uns go down to Rollin' Fork and take a look at them gunboats? I've heared tell that our people have come over from Vicksburg, an' got 'em in a tight place. Mebbe we might get a chance to take a pop at some of them fellers who think a blue uniform is so much purtier'n the gray."

"We talked that over as we rode along, and came to the conclusion that perhaps it would be a good plan," replied the colonel. "If our brave people are in need of assistance, we must give it to them; and if they are going to win a victory, we ought to be there to share in the honors of it. Captain Ryder, why don't you put your company into boats and take them to Rolling Fork? The sixty or seventy good shots that you have in your command ought to make things lively for the Yankees when they get warmed up to their work."

"Kurnel, thar ain't boats enough in Mississip to carry my company over thar," answered Ryder. "The Yanks have tooken off an' cut up the most of

'em, an' the rest is hid in the cane whar nobody can't find 'em."

"But you have had plenty of time to build boats since that expedition started into these bayous," was Colonel St. Clair's rejoinder. "A man of any energy could have accomplished wonders, while you have been loafing around doing nothing. You don't seem to have done the first thing for your country since I went to Tennessee. I see that the houses of well known Union men are still standing, when they ought to have been in ashes long ago. That doesn't speak well for your zeal in the cause."

"But you must admit that it speaks volumes for his prudence," one of the colonel's friends ventured to remark. "I do not know of any one in the country who would go to greater lengths to punish an act of that kind than Luke Bennett would. He knows that we are here, as well as we know it ourselves; and if Ryder and his men should become active all on a sudden, he wouldn't be long in finding out who was to blame for it. You want a house to live in when you come home from the war, after our independence has been secured, and so do I; consequently I am opposed to any extreme measures. Let's devote our time to finding the money and leave the houses alone."

Captain Ryder said that that was his idea exactly, but it wasn't, as we shall presently see. He was in no humor to listen to any further suggestions from the haughty Colonel St. Clair, so he spurred his lazy old mule into a lope, and went on up the lane.

CHAPTER IX.

CATCHING A TARTAR.

His recent interview with Ike Bishop, taken in connection with Colonel St. Clair's reproachful words, had put the very mischief into Captain Ryder's head, and aroused him to a full sense of the responsibility that rested upon him. Taken in a lump, he and his guerrilla band were the biggest lot of cowards that could have been gathered together in any country.

Although they had been in the service more than two years, they had never faced an armed enemy. They all lived at home, but they would become restless now and then, and saddle up, and start off through the country, as if they had made up their minds to do something.

And what a motley crew they were when they all got together, mounted on their scraggy mules and yew necked, sway backed horses, no two of them dressed alike, except in the matter of buttons, and every one armed to suit his own fancy. They looked hard enough when they set out on their raid, but they did not look so when they came back. They were better mounted and better clothed, and not infrequently they brought a small but heavily loaded wagon train with them; and for a time their families had more than they could eat.

Ryder did not have time to get his company together that day; but bright and early the next

morning they were all on hand and ready for business.

"Look wild thar, you uns!" shouted Captain Ryder, as he dug the spurs into his mule, and rode along in front of his company of braves, who had assembled in obedience to his orders of the previous day.

This command was meant for "Attention, company!" but his men did not pay the slightest heed to it. They had made an awkward attempt to fall in in double rank, but they did not know enough to "right dress," and the line was as crooked as a rail fence.

Very fierce and warlike looked the guerrilla chieftain, as he paraded before the daring spirits whom he had called together to raid the houses of the obnoxious Union men who had to be conscripted before they would go into the army to fight for the South. His slouch hat was turned up on one side, and fastened with a regulation Confederate plume, and in his hand he held a rusty saber, instead of the heavy bear killer he usually carried on his raids.

No doubt he would have looked like a model rough rider had it not been for the unpatriotic spirit that animated the mule he bestrode. That much abused and long suffering animal said, as plainly as a mule could say anything, that he had had about enough of this soldier business. He kept his back arched, like the segment of a circle, moved with short, uncertain jumps, and came down stiff legged, as if he had half a mind to "buck." There was a look of resignation and sorrow in his meek, brown eyes, but he was only awaiting a favorable opportunity to send his rider sprawling in the dust.

For a wonder, there was no laughing or joking among the guerrillas, but there was a good deal of

suppressed excitement among them. They were about to undertake a very disagreeable as well as a dangerous piece of work.

"We uns will have to look out for ourselves from this time on," remarked Pete Williams, throwing one leg over the horn of his saddle, and knocking the ashes from his pipe by tapping the bowl against the heel of his boot. "I wish Kurnel St. Clair had stayed with the army up in Tennessee 'stead of comin' hum an' puttin' idees like this'n' into the head of Cap'n Ryder. He wants to show off before the kurn, Ryder does, an' that's what he's doin' this for. I'll bet you that some of us won't have no houses to sleep in before another week has passed over our heads. The settlement'll look as though the Yanks had been through here. I say, let the houses alone, an' look for the money in the swamp, whar it is hid; an' that's what Ryder himself always said till Ike Bishop an' St. Clair got after him yesterday."

"Ha yoop!" shouted Captain Ryder, flourishing his sword in the air. "Look wild thar! Come up in the middle thar, you uns who have got so fur behind the——"

What else the chieftain was about to say the company did not know. When that wild Indian yell rang in his ears the mule thought that the moment for which he was waiting had arrived, and he improved it by putting his head between his forelegs and sending both his hind ones straight into the air. The result was that the captain was sent headlong to the ground.

Paying no heed to the jeers and laughter of his men, he raised himself to a sitting posture, wiped the dust from his mouth, and said, sadly:

"That's what makes me 'spise a mule."

One would think that he would have fallen upon

the offending beast with the flat of his saber, and given him a severe pounding; but Ryder did nothing of the kind. Without the least exhibition of anger he got upon his feet, laid hold of the bridle (the mule did not stir from his tracks after performing this exploit), and went on with his speech as if nothing had happened.

"Now, you uns, quit your laughin', an' pay some heed to what I'm tellin' you," said he. "We're goin' to hunt for the money that them conscripted Union fellers has got hid away somewhars, an' we're goin' to have it afore we quit lookin'. You hear me? Some of you uns is mighty skeary that Luke'll come outen the swamp when he hears of it, an' go to shootin' an' burnin'. Ain't that a game we uns can play at well as he can? We'll leave the houses whar we find 'em this time; but if Luke comes from his hide out an' begins a pesterin' of us, we uns will turn to and burn the last one of 'em. We can tell him that."

"It's a good idee, too," observed one of the men. "Why don't they divide their gold with them that needs it? We uns think jest as much of our women folks an' young ones as they do, if we are poor; an' we don't like to see 'em go hungry any better than they would."

"Perzackly," assented the captain. "That's good reasonin', Sam'l, an' nobody can't dispute it. Barron's house is the first one we shall come to, an' when we get in sight of it, we'll make a charge an' surround it, so't none of the folks can't run out an' warn the rest. Then some of us will go in an' ask for the money. Crowd up together, four in a line, an' go endways, like I told you, an' when you get down to them houses, show yourselves to be the men I take you for."

These words were all that was necessary to excite

the guerrillas almost to frenzy. They had little or nothing to lose and everything to make, and this is the sort of men that the police and military have to meet when they are called on to fight a mob. With alacrity they obeyed the captain's order to "crowd up together and go endways down the lane."

For a while they rode along in an orderly manner; but when they came within sight of the house, to whose defenseless inmates they intended to pay their respects, they put their animals into a gallop and went tearing up the broad avenue like a horde of savages. Dividing right and left in front of the door, they came together in the rear, and thus the house was surrounded, and its occupants made captive for the time being.

Having seen his men posted to his satisfaction, Ryder and about a dozen others who were as mean as he was, got off their horses, and walked up to the door, where they were met by Frank Barron's mother, who faced them with the utmost composure. It takes something besides a plume and a cavalry saber to strike terror to the heart of a Southern woman.

CHAPTER X.

THE GUERRILLAS IN ACTION.

"To what am I indebted for the honor of this visit?" inquired Mrs. Barron, after she had waited a full minute for Captain Ryder to make known his wants.

The fierce frown faded instantly from the face of the guerrilla chief, for there was something in the little woman's look and bearing that took all the courage out of him. He could not forget that she had fed him when he was hungry, and given him medicine that broke up his wife's chills and fever; and if he had been alone it is probable that he would have offered some excuse for his intrusion and beaten a hasty retreat; but the eyes of his men were upon him, and it was as much as his position was worth to back out now.

More than that, if he did not find the money he had come there after, and of which he and the members of his company stood so much in need, the unscrupulous Colonel St. Clair would take possession of it, and he had more than his share already. With this reflection to spur him on, Captain Ryder recalled the frown to his face, and said, with a desperate attempt to appear at his ease:

"We uns have come here to tell you that we want the money you've got. If you will hand it out peaceable, well an' good; if you won't——"

"You and your men will search my house," said

Mrs. Barron, putting her hand into her pocket. "Well, I will save you that trouble. I believe now that there is some truth in the reports that I have heard regarding the way you conduct yourselves when you go off on your raids."

"We uns don't know what you have heared; an' what's more, we don't care," shouted Ryder's lieutenant, the man who was the most to blame for all the outrages that were committed by the band during their absence from the settlement. "But we uns can tell you this, Miss Barron: when your ole man cums home from the trenches, if he ever does, he won't find no house to creep into, if you don't trot out that thar money without no more foolin'," said the lieutenant, turning to his men, from whom he received many winks and nods of encouragement. "Tell him that the next time you write to him."

"If I do, it will be no news to him," was Mrs. Barron's quiet rejoinder. "Knowing the character of some of the people who live in this settlement, my husband does not expect to find his home standing when he returns."

"He won't be disapp'inted, I bet you," chimed in Captain Ryder. He saw the winks and nods, as well as the beaming looks of admiration that his men bestowed upon the lieutenant, and something told him that if he wanted to retain command of the company, he must wake up and perform some exploit worthy of a Confederate rough rider. He had seen those signs of approval before, and he began to be suspicious that his first officer was trying to oust him from the captaincy and shove himself in. "He won't be disapp'inted, I bet you," repeated Ryder, turning to the guerrillas with an air which seemed to say that no Union man, or woman, either, could trifle with him. "An' thar's that boy of your'n, an' the fellers that's with him! Why don't they all

come out an' fight, like they had oughter do, 'stead of hidin' themselves away in the swamp, like so many cowards? If you uns don't give up that thar money, we uns will hang the last one of them boys for traitors."

"Frank's course has my hearty approval, for he is doing just what his father told him to do," replied the brave woman, without the slightest tremor in her voice. "I have no fears for his safety; but I shall fear for yours, if you attempt to carry your threat into execution. But there is no need of any more bluster. There is every cent of money there is in the house."

As Mrs. Barron spoke, she took her hand out of her pocket, and placed in the captain's outstretched palm twenty dollars in Confederate bills. The whole roll would not have purchased as much bacon and flour at any store in Mississippi as a five dollar greenback.

"'Tain't that sort of stuff we uns want," shouted the lieutenant. "It's the Yankee gold that we're after. Whar is is it? I ask you that for the last time."

"I have already told you that that is every cent there is in the house, and I have no more to say," answered Mrs. Barron, who knew very well what the excited and angry officer's next order would be.

"Hey yoop!" yelled the lieutenant. "It's jes' as I expected, boys. Now turn to an'——"

"Hold you yawp!" sternly commanded Captain Ryder. "Do you want to alarm Ramsay's women folks so't they can run off the gold afore we uns get thar?"

"Hold your jaw yourself, Amos Ryder," retorted the insubordinate lieutentant. "You ain't fitten for work of this kind, an' we uns have had about enough of you. I can tell you that. Now turn to an' pull

up everything, boys. The shanty is your'n to do what you please with it. Look under the floors, an' into the beds an' cupboards, an'——"

The guerrillas, who were like so many bloodhounds held in the leash, waited to hear no more. With a wild yell, that was taken up and repeated by their comrades outside, they entered upon their work of destruction, and in less time than it takes me to write it, every room in the house was in the greatest confusion.

After they had wrecked the house and found nothing, the guerrillas, headed by Captain Ryder, ran out into the yard to see what they could find there. The captain tried to be everywhere at once, for he was afraid that if his mutinous lieutenant discovered the hiding place of the money, the men would want to reward him by making him commander of the company.

Every nook and corner of the cellar, smokehouse, corncribs and negro cabins were overhauled, and flower beds were sounded with iron ramrods. Whenever there was a soft spot found in them, there was a loud call for spades; and by the time the guerrillas grew tired, and began to show signs of giving it up as a bad job, the dooryard looked as though a squad of men had been at work throwing up rifle pits.

"'Tain't no use wastin' more time hyar, boys," shouted the captain at last. "Git onto your critters, an' we'll go down an' try t'other places. Sorry to have been the kase of so much bother to you uns, Miss Barron, but you see what you git by not trottin' out that money when I told you."

Frank's mother, who had stood quietly by and witnessed the wanton destruction of her property without uttering a single word of remonstrance, had nothing to say in reply. When the guerrillas had

mounted and ridden away out of sight, she turned to the weeping "mammy," who acted as housekeeper, and who had kept close to her side as if she feared that some indignity might be offered her beloved mistress.

"Martha," said she, "it isn't worth while to fret about things we can't help. Get some of our people together, and straighten up as well as you can."

"What for dey wan' come hyar an' do dis?" sobbed Aunt Martha. "We uns never pestered dem no fashion, an' what for dey can't luf us be? If young Moss' Frank don't shoot dat rebbel de fus' ting he do, his ole mammy'll be powerful sorry dat she tuk such mighty good care of him when he was a babby—she will so."

Mrs. Barron turned away without making any answer. That was just what she was afraid Frank would do when he heard of it. She had kept up a brave front during a terrible ordeal, but now, woman like, she locked herself in her room and had a good cry over it.

During the next few hour these things were acted over again in the houses of four other Union men in the settlement, and when the sun went down, Ryder's enraged and disappointed men slowly wended their way homeward. They had incurred the enmity of some of the most determined men and boys in the State, and they had made just a hundred and twenty five dollars in Confederate money by it. It was a poor day's work, and now they wished they hadn't done it.

CHAPTER XI.

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE PICKETS.

When Captain Ryder put the spurs to his mule and galloped away from Ike Bishop's gate, a wagon drove up, bringing a supply of provisions and blankets for Colonel St. Clair and his hunting party. As soon as Ike had secured his gun and a few necessary articles which his mother had provided for him, he put himself at the head of the squad, and led it through an old cotton field, and into a narrow strip of woods that bordered upon the swamp.

There they found the four canoes that Ike had been instructed to have in readiness on this particular morning. Without any unnecessary delay they put in their luggage, and shoved away from the shore.

"Now, then," said Colonel St. Clair, the acknowledged leader of the expedition, addressing himself to Ike Bishop, who had been brought along to act as guide, pack horse, and man-of-all-work, "strike as straight a course as you can for Rolling Fork. If we find that our friends there would be glad of our help, we will stay and give it to them; but if they can get along without us, we'll come back and hunt bears."

Ike was by no means so knowing and talkative in the presence of Colonel St. Clair and his friends as he had shown himself to be during his interview with Captain Ryder. For four long hours he pad-

dled straight ahead, without once offering a remark, while the colonel and his companions had a good deal to say to one another. They talked about bears and nothing else, as they did that night when Ned Marsh stumbled upon their camp, and no one would have supposed that they had any other game in view; but Ike knew all about it, for the real object of the expedition had been fully explained to him.

"This here thing is a goin' to be the makin' of me," soliloquized Ike, who saw more pleasure in communing with his own thoughts than he would have found by taking part in the conversation. "I wish I knowed jest how much Luke Bennett an' the rest of them fellers have got the handlin' of, so't I could make a few kalkerlations. It's a power of money anyhow, an' the kurn says my shar' of it will make me rich. I'll give a thousand dollars of it to mam—that'll be enough to keep her in grub an' clo'es till we uns get the Yanks whopped and drove outen the country—an' I'll take the rest up to Tennessee with me. It's the rich fellers that gets the stars onto their collars—the poor ones all have to stay in the ranks, and that is what makes 'em call it a rich man's war and a poor man's fight—an' who knows but when General Bragg finds out that I have got money, he'll give me a star or sumthin' to put onto *my* collar? Then I'll be as big a man as any of 'em, won't I? Kurnel Bishop! Hey yoop! But afore I let that thar Luke Bennett go, I'm a goin' to punch his head to pay him for that whoppin' he give me, I bet you," said Ike, carefully passing his fingers over his nose to see if the lump that had been raised there by the young Unionist's hard fist had gone away yet. "I ain't forgot that, an' I won't nuther, as long as I stay on top the ground."

All on a sudden Ike ceased his exertions at the

paddle, and after listening a moment, raised the implement aloft, to draw the attention of his companions. The talking was instantly hushed, and the three rear canoes were pushed up alongside his own.

"I couldn't have tooken you uns any straighter to whar them gunboats be that we're goin' to captur', if I had been hyar a hundred times afore," said Ike, in response to the colonel's inquiring glances. "I heared shootin' jest now, an' that tells me that we're clost onto Rollin' Fork."

There was a moment's silence, and then a defiant roar rang through the swamp with startling distinctness. Some irate gunboat commander, who was getting tired of being tormented by the sharpshooters, had sent a load of canister or a stand of grape among them, in the hope of compelling them to keep still for a while.

"I don't think it would be quite safe to go any further in this direction," observed the colonel. "As we want to get among our friends and see what they are doing, perhaps we had better drop down a mile or two, and cross the bayou below the fleet."

The others agreeing to this proposal, the guide, in obedience to a wave of the colonel's hand, turned and followed a course that lay almost at right angles with the one he had been pursuing. The incessant fire of musketry kept up by the sharpshooters grew more and more indistinct, and when it died away in the distance, Ike, believing that they had got below the fleet, called another halt, and volunteered to go ahead alone, and see if the way was clear.

He was gone about half an hour, and returned with the gratifying news that there was not a single vessel, either gunboat or transport, to be seen in the bayou, and there was nothing to prevent them from crossing over the ridge to see how their friends were getting on. This they did in safety; but no sooner

had they pushed their canoes through the bushes that lined the base of the ridge, and run their bows upon the shore, than they were surrounded by a squad of rebel pickets.

"Hello, here!" exclaimed the officer in command, with a ring of triumph in his tones. "This is once that the game didn't work, ain't it? Where did you drop down from, and what are you doing on the wrong side of the ridge?"

"We dropped down from Bragg's army," answered the colonel, who knew that the officer took him and his party for deserters from Vicksburg, "and we landed on this side of the levee, because we have just come from home. We live a few miles back in the country, and have come home on a thirty days' furlough."

"Of course you have brought your papers with you?" said the officer, in a little milder tones. "You see," he added, as the colonel produced a printed document and passed it over for his inspection, "we are losing a good many men by desertion just now, and whenever we find a soldier outside the lines, we want to know how he got there."

"No apologies are necessary, captain," replied the colonel. "I hope I am too good a soldier to find fault with an officer for doing his duty. My companions are all right."

"That assurance is quite sufficient, and I don't care to see their papers," said the captain. "You heard the firing and came over to see what we are doing, I suppose?" he continued. "Well, we're not doing much, although we've got the fleet cut up into three sections. The four gunboats in the lead cannot go any farther, because we have cut trees across the bayou and stopped their progress. About two miles lower down lies the Decatur, which can't do anything on account of our sharpshooters; and about fifteen

miles still lower down, are a lot of transports, with General Sherman and a division of soldiers on board. We have kept the bayou closely guarded day and night, to prevent all communication between these different boats, but I don't suppose we have succeeded in doing that. We are looking for the soldiers every hour, and when they come, we shall have to dig out."

"Then you don't expect to capture the gunboats?" said the colonel, in a disappointed tone.

"Oh, no," replied the officer with a laugh. "All we can do is to bother them so that they can't force their way into Sunflower, and from there into the Yazoo, and come up on the rear of Haines' Bluff."

Colonel St. Clair thanked the captain for the information he had given, got into his canoe, and shoved off toward the bayou.

With the exception of the events already mentioned, nothing happened to Colonel St. Clair and his hunting party during the day that is worthy of record. As they did not know where to look to find Luke Bennett's hide out, the only thing they could do was to paddle about through the swamp, pushing their canoes into every thicket of bushes and clump of cane which looked as though it might conceal a spot of dry ground.

Of course if this plan could be followed long enough, it was bound to be successful sooner or later; but that was right where the trouble was. At least a week of their thirty days' leave had already expired; it would take them another week to go back to Tennessee, owing to the uncertainty of making connections along the route, and it was a question whether or not they could go all over that big swamp, and peep into every nook and corner in it, during the sixteen days that remained to them.

Their time was short; but we shall presently see that it was quite long enough for them to put Luke and his friends to a good deal of trouble.

The only dry ground they found during their wanderings was the little spot on which they made their camp that night. When the hound awoke them with his baying, and they got up and mended the fire and smoked their pipes, they distinctly saw Ned Marsh's canoe, but as Ned kept himself out of sight behind the tree he was hugging, they supposed it was a log that had caught there, and did not take a second look at it.

They made an early start the next morning, and, if they had been a little more cautious in their movements, might have succeeded in taking a couple of prisoners; but believing they were alone in the swamp, they made no effort to hide their approach from the sharp eyes of old Uncle Sam, who, in company with Ned Marsh, made good his escape, in spite of the shower of bullets and buckshot that were sent after him.

"That nigger bears a charmed life," exclaimed the colonel, who had laid himself flat on the bottom of his canoe and taken a dead rest at Sam over the bow. "If we only knew as much as he does, we wouldn't be long in finding Luke and his gang."

"How long do you think we would be in getting our hands on them?" inquired Captain Griffin. "Our only chance of success lies in a surprise. We can't take them by assault, for they are all good shots, and as plucky as they make them. We couldn't surround them and starve them out, for Luke Bennett wouldn't allow himself to be shut up in a stronghold without grub enough to stand a siege."

"Let's find them first, and talk over other matters afterward," replied the colonel. "Take after Sam,

all of us, and bang away at him every chance we get. I wonder where in the world he picked up that Yank?"

"He can't be anything but a bearer of dispatches who has lost his way," said the captain, confidently. "He's a gunboat officer; he's got too much gold lace about his clothes for a soldier. If we can't capture him, we can at least hang around the bayou, between here and the transports, and keep him from delivering his dispatches. That will be a little accomplished for the cause."

All this while the colonel and his party were making the most strenous exertions to keep Sam in sight; but the old negro, handling his paddle with wonderful strength and skill, proved himself to be an adept at dodging, and when the pursuers came to the place where he was, he wasn't there. He and Ned Marsh were safely hidden in the cane; and though the hunting party searched long and carefully, they could not find the slightest trace of them.

"Captain Ryder calls himself the Swamp Fox," said the colonel, pulling out his handkerchief, and wiping the big drops of perspiration from his forehead. "I think that would be a more appropriate name for old Sam to bear. He's got the best right to it, for I never saw anybody quite so cunning as he has shown himself to be this morning. Gentle*men*," added the colonel, with a strong accent on the last syllable, "an idea strikes me. The only way to gobble Luke Bennett and his friends, is to make a prisoner of Sam, and send him over to Vicksburg. Then how will those boys get supplies, unless they leave their hide out and go home after them?"

"That's the idea," exclaimed Captain Griffin. "It is one of the rules of war to threaten the enemy's communications, if you can't get at the enemy himself. If we can get Sam out of the way, and induce

Ryder to help us, we can gobble every one of those refugees by simply watching their homes at night. It's the only way we ever will catch them, too."

"And when they lose Sam, they will lose their dispatch bearer," observed one of the other men. "It is through him that they keep posted in everything that goes on in the settlement, and I'll bet that he has got a letter in his pocket at this very minute that would be of value to us if we could get hold of it. I say, catch Sam with as little delay as possible."

The others said so too, and from that hour the old negro was in more danger than he had ever been in before.

The colonel and his party never suspected that Tramp was also a bearer of dispatches, and that Luke and his companions visited the settlement as often as they felt like it, in spite of the vigilance of Captain Ryder and his band of guerrillas.

They found it out, however. When they went home an alarming surprise awaited them.

CHAPTER XII.

AN ALARM FROM THE SOUTH.

At the close of the seventh chapter I said that Ned Marsh was much surprised by the magical way in which Luke Bennett disappeared from his view. It seemed to him that the young refugee walked straight into the side of the hill that arose behind the camp fire and a short distance from it; but when a bright light shot out of the darkness, as Luke struck a match and touched it to a sputtering tallow dip, Ned saw that what he had taken for a little rise of the ground was in reality a dense thicket of bushes, the interior of which had been cut away to permit the erection of a neat and commodious bark shanty. He saw Luke seat himself at a table, and draw some writing materials toward him.

A few minutes later Luke came out of the cabin, holding in his hand a letter, which he had wrapped in a piece of oiled silk. "Now, Sam, tie this around Tramp's neck, and start him home with it. Say, Duckfoot, you've got to stay here as long as that hunting party is loafing about in the swamp, and if mother should invite you to call upon her at her house, would you do it?"

Ned promptly replied that he would, little dreaming what a scrape that same promise was destined to get him into.

"Of course mother wouldn't think of asking you to come out of your place of concealment, unless she

knew that the coast was clear, and that you would be in no danger from the guerrillas," continued Luke Bennett, holding fast to the impatient Tramp, while old Sam tied the letter around his neck. "We fellows brought you here to take care of you, and not to get you into trouble."

"So I supposed," said Ned, "and if it hadn't been for you, I should probably have been on my way to Vicksburg before this time. Our troops will be in possession of this whole region very shortly, and you may be sure that I shall not fail to give your names to an officer who will look out for you. How long do you think it will be before I can go on with my dispatches?"

"That's a conundrum," answered Luke. "We shall be rid of the presence of this hunting party in less than a week, but there is no telling how much mischief they may put into Amos Ryder's head before they leave the country. They will be sure to tell him that they have seen a live Yank in company with old Sam, and of course the guerrillas will do their best to capture you. It would be a feather in their caps, if they could take you over to Vicksburg. Is the letter all right, Sam? Then take him ashore and start him off with your blessing. When you come back, put up the bars to keep the wolves out of the fold."

The young officer wondered what the real meaning of that order was; but he made no remark, knowing that if Luke thought it best to enlighten him, he would do it without waiting to be questioned. Tramp, who knew just what was expected of him, jumped into the canoe, and then Sam got in and shoved off into the cane.

When he was out of sight, Luke made a sign to Joe Ramsay, who arose from his seat, and the two disappeared in the cabin. They were gone five min-

utes, and when they came out again, Ned saw that they had armed and equipped themselves for a journey.

"You don't intend to waste any time, do you?" said Frank Barron, who seemed to know what his companions were going to do.

"What's the use?" asked Luke, in reply. "The letters are written, and if they are delivered tonight, they may be the means of saving us a very disagreeable piece of work. Now, Duckfoot, we will leave you to the tender mercies of our friends until we come back."

"Why don't you fellows take him into the hide out and show him where we live?" said Joe. "Perhaps his sleep would be more refreshing if we sound the alarm as we go out, just to let him see how thoroughly protected we are, and how impossible it would be for that hunting party, or any other lot of men, to take us by surprise. Don't let Sam come after us. He is our right bower, you know, and we can't afford to lose him. Good by, everybody."

So saying, Joe and Luke went back into the cabin, and that was the last Ned saw of them that night.

"Now, I'll just tell you what's a fact," said a drawling voice on the other side of the fire. It came from a boy who had not spoken before, since Ned came in the camp.

"Hello, there! Have you waked up at last?" exclaimed Frank. "It's Sidney Jones," he added, turning to Ned. "He is well up in his Latin and Greek, but he doesn't understand English very well, and for that reason he does not often take part in our conversations; but when he condescends to talk so that we can comprehend him, he generally says something. What is it, Sid?"

"Talking without eating is hard work," answered Sid.

"What did I tell you, Duckfoot?" exclaimed Frank. "Sid always says something when he talks in English. But you haven't done any talking to make you hungry."

"But I want a bite to eat, all the same. I saw Sam carry two buckets into the cellar, and something tells me that there is sweet milk in one of them, and buttermilk in the other. I think we had better drink some of that milk, in order to save it."

"I know there are lots of good things in that bundle, too," said Tom Pike. "But Sam will be sure to jaw if we meddle with them during his absence, so we will wait until he returns, and tell him to get up a good supper for us."

The others were strongly in favor of this, except Ned Marsh. The two light meals he had eaten that day served to sharpen his appetite, rather than take the edge off it, and he was as hungry as a wolf.

While he was telling himself that he wished old Sam would hasten his coming, he was startled by the quick, sharp stroke of an invisible gong, followed by the violent and long continued ringing of a bell.

"Hear that?" queried Frank.

"I should say so," was Ned's reply. "Is that the alarm that Joe spoke of just as he was going away? Where is it?"

"Come with me and I will show you," said Frank, rising from his seat.

The young officer followed him, and presently obtained his first view of the interior of the hide out which, ever since the war began, had afforded these five boys a snug shelter, and a retreat so secure that not a single one of their enemies had been able to find it.

"And I assure you they have looked for it early and late," said Tom Pike, who had followed them to the door. "They are looking for it now, and will

keep it up as long as they think there is anything to be made by finding it."

"But it will be a sorry day for the successful party," observed Sid, who, now he had found his tongue, seemed disposed to show that he knew how to use it. "It is simply impossible for a stranger to come near us without giving us warning of his approach. Look here," he continued, placing his hand upon a sliding panel and pushing it from its position, revealing to Ned's view a small box containing two bells and a gong. "It's an invention of my own, but I have not yet applied for a patent. The Confederate Government wouldn't give it to me, because I am a Union man; and the people at Washington would shake their heads at me, for the reason that, living in a rebel State as I do, they would think that I must of necessity be a grayback myself. So I shall have to wait until this little quarrel is decided one way or the other."

Ned Marsh was greatly interested in the ingenious contrivance. "How does this work, any way?" he asked.

"I shall have to explain it to you the best I can, because I can't take one of the bells down without throwing the whole business out of gear," answered Sidney. "You see, each one of these bells is fastened to a strong spring which is wound up like a clock;" and suiting the action to the word, Sidney proceeded to wind up the bell that had just been rung. "See those three thick wires in there? They run out to different sides of our island, which is only about a hundred feet square. I know it looks bigger, but it's on account of the bushes and cane that surround it. The thickets of which I speak are so very dense that it would be an undertaking of some difficulty for a boatman to work his way through them, unless he happened to strike the narrow pas-

sage that we generally use in going back and forth; but for fear that some one may attempt it, these thick wires, when they reach the water, have other wires made fast to them, which branch away in every direction."

"Under the water, I suppose?" said Ned.

"Well, on each side of the island is a wire which extends into the swamp about a quarter of a mile. All these are under water and out of sight; but the others are fastened to the bushes in our immediate neighborhood. As the main wires twist and turn about in every direction, you can easily see that an intruder doesn't stand one chance in a hundred of getting by them. The least touch on one of those wires would release the spring that would set one of the bells to clattering."

"What's the gong for?"

"To give us warning in the day time, the bells being wound up at night for fear that one stroke of the gong would not wake us up. These bells keep up a persistent racket, and if they were to sound in the day time, they might be the means of drawing a searching party to our hide out, when they would otherwise keep clear of it. We are not spoiling for a fight, and consequently we don't want anybody to find our shanty if we can help it. We're nicely fixed here, and don't care to pull up stakes."

"Wouldn't one bell do as well as three?" inquired Ned.

"Well, yes; but then, you see, we thought we should like to know where the danger that threatened us was coming from, so I put up all the bells I could lay hands on. When Luke and Joe went away they rang this bell, and that shows that they touched the wire that leads off to the south of the island. Of course they did it on purpose."

Ned waited a moment in the hope that Sidney

would go on and tell him where Luke and his friend went, and what the business was that called them away from the hide out at that time of night; but as the boy did not show any disposition to enlighten him on that point, Ned asked:

"What did Luke mean by telling Sam to put up the bars to keep the wolves out of the fold?"

"Why, this is the fold," answered Sidney; "that hunting party and Ryder's guerrillas and every one else who wants to do us harm are the wolves, and the bars are the wires that guard the narrow channel through the cane. Those wires are always down during the day, because we are constantly passing in and out of there, and we don't want to keep ringing bells all the time; but we never forget to put them up before we turn in for the night."

"I wondered why you did not have some dogs with you for a bodyguard, but now I believe I understand the matter," said the young officer. "A dog is liable to give tongue when he ought to keep still, and if there were any prowlers about the sound of his baying might bring them to you; but the bells never ring unless the wires are disturbed."

"You've hit it exactly," said Sidney. "Each one of us has a small pack of hounds at home, but we wouldn't have them find their way to this hide out for all the money there is in the State of Mississippi."

"Have you any objection to telling me where Luke and Joe went to so suddenly?" asked Ned "I saw them come into this hide out, but I didn't see them afterward."

"They went through this door," said Frank Barron, moving another sliding panel; but when Ned looked out of it he could not see anything, until Tom Pike took the candle from the table and held it in the doorway; then Ned saw before him a narrow passage which was dark as a pocket.

"It looks as though it was dug through the ground, doesn't it?" said Sidney. "Well, it isn't. It is cut through a dense clump of bushes which, meeting overhead, completely shut out every ray of light, even at midday. If you should follow it about twenty feet, you would find that it leads to a little cove where we keep our canoes hidden Luke and Joe took one of them when they went away, and when they got out a piece they touched one of the wires, believing that you would sleep sounder if you could see for yourself what precautions we have taken to—holy Moses! What was that?" ejaculated Sidney, in a frightened whisper. "Frank, shut the door and cover up the fire. Tom, come here with your candle."

As Sidney spoke he sprang into the air, and when he landed on his feet he had cleared the entire length of the hide out, and was standing in front of the box that contained the alarm bells.

To push the panel from its place was the work of but a second, and a single glance showed Sidney that his sharp ears had not deceived him. One of the wires was shaking violently. The wire communicating with it had been touched, but not with sufficient force to release the spring.

"Look at that, will you!" whispered Sidney, whose face was as white as a sheet. "Sam never did that, because he knows where all the wires are, and besides this comes from the south. Somebody is coming over here from Vicksburg, as sure as you're born."

Just as Sidney ceased speaking, the mysterious power, which had so suddenly and without the least warning struck terror to the hearts of the four refugees, again exerted itself; the spring was thrown, and one of the bells set up a fearful clamor.

CHAPTER XIII.

A STARTLING ENCOUNTER.

"Look at that, will you!" repeated Sidney, in great excitement, at the same time seizing the bell and throwing the catch into place so as to stop the racket. "This looks like business, sure enough."

"I wish Luke and Joe were here," said Ned, "and old Sam, too. I am afraid they will stumble upon those fellows in the dark."

"Don't be uneasy," replied Frank Barron. "They are always on the alert, and they will see the enemy before the latter see them, I bet you. We're the ones to be sorry for."

Meanwhile Tom Pike, who was smothering the camp fire by piling wet leaves and green boughs upon it, was startled by hearing a very slight rustling among the cane in the direction of the narrow passageway which they generally used in going to and from the swamp.

He thought it was Sam, and became sure of it when the cautionary signal, the bark of a red squirrel, which he quickly gave, was as quickly answered.

A moment later the old negro ran the bow of his dugout high upon the beach, and hastened toward the shanty. He showed a good deal of the whites of his eyes, and his countenance expressed the greatest consternation.

"You saw them, did you?" said Tom, in a low tone.

"Only one of them, moss'r—only jes' but one, replied Sam. "Wha' Moss' Luke—an'—an' Moss' Joe?"

"They have gone off on a little private business," said Tom, impatiently.

"Whar—whar 'bouts dey gone?" inquired the negro, who seemed to be very much concerned for the safety of the absent boys. "What for dey wan' fool ole Sam dat a way—done sent de nigger off wid Tramp, an' den slip out widout nobody to took keer on 'em! Dat's no way to treat ole Sam."

"They can take care of themselves without any of your help," said Sidney. "They have gone to put a letter on Colonel St. Clair's doorstep, telling him that he has been in this country long enough. There. Does that satisfy you? You say there is only one prowler out there. Did you recognize him?"

The negro, who was in a state of mind bordering on frenzy, replied that he did not know who the canoeist was who was loafing around out there for no good purpose. He had watched him for a long time, while he was waiting for a chance to slip unobserved into the channel that led to the island, but he could not make him out. And then he began railing at "Moss' Luke, who had done went off in de dark widout takin' de ole nigger along to show him de way an' fetch him safe back."

"I shouldn't think he could recognize anybody in such darkness as this," said Ned Marsh, as he buckled on his side arms. "When I came in I couldn't see my hand before me."

"It's lighter now than it was then, for the moon is coming up," answered Sidney. "But there are a good many ways of telling a man in the dark, even if you can't see anything but the outlines of his

figure. You can distinguish him by his motions. No two men ride a canoe just alike, and almost every one has a way of handling a paddle that is peculiar to himself. You see, Duckfoot, how acute one's senses become after——"

The sudden and violent ringing of one of the bells cut short Sidney's words. It was dark in the hide out, for Sid had blown out the candle after he got through using it; but Ned Marsh knew, as well as the others did, that the bell was not the one that rang before. The tone was different. This proved that the island was being approached from another direction.

"Oh, Lawd! Oh, Lawd, look down on us poor mis'able niggers!" groaned old Sam, who was frightened half to death. "If you don't watch up dar, ole Sam gone up, suah!"

"Yes, I think old Sam has gone up this time," was the comforting reply of Sidney Jones, who made all haste to stop the clangor of the bell. "This is all the evidence we want that you didn't see all those prowlers. This warning comes from the east, and shows that the island is surrounded already. Old man, I think you will have to go to Vicksburg this time."

"Oh, Lawd!" said old Sam again; and like the pious darky he was, he began praying for just what he wanted. "Don't luf de rebbels gobble de good ole nigger up 'fore your face an' eyes, an' tote him away to Vicksburg to whack de army nu-els. Sam too ole fur dat sort o' work, an' he break his ole back, suah."

"Couldn't the single man that Sam saw go clear around the island during the time we have been talking?"

"Yes, he could do that; but it isn't at all likely that he has done it, unless he knows right where the

island is," replied Frank Barron. "And if he knows that, who posted him? Who told him where to find us?"

Just then a thrilling whisper came to them through the darkness. It was from Tom Pike, and the words he uttered made them shiver as if some one had dropped a lump of ice down their backs. He had left the hide out to finish the work of smothering the camp fire, after which he stopped a moment to listen.

"Boys," said he, in trembling tones, "here's the queerest thing I ever heard of. The signal has been given all fair and square."

"No!" gasped Sidney and Frank, hurrying out of the shanty with Ned at their heels.

"But I say yes," insisted Tom. "My ears never went back on me yet. Now, wait a minute, and perhaps we shall all hear it."

The boys held their breath to listen, and after a little silence the signal was given. It was a perfect imitation of the bark of a red squirrel—the *sp-r-r-r* that the little animal utters before he begins dancing about on the tree and scolding at the schoolboy beneath, who is picking up the nuts which the industrious rodent had thrown down for his own winter's use.

At the same instant there was an alarm from the third bell, and Sidney hastened into the hide out to stop it.

"That signal frightens me," whispered Tom Pike. "It's the most terrifying sound I ever heard in my life. Neither Luke nor Joe could have given it, for they wouldn't have set all those bells to ringing. There's some stranger out there, and his presence means *treachery*. That's the long and short of it."

"Now, then," said Sidney, joining the group again, after stopping the ringing of the bell, "sug-

gest something, somebody. I confess I don't know what to do. I wish that fellow, whoever he may be was miles from here; but if he's a friend——"

"Friend!" interrupted Tom Pike.

"Deserter, then," continued Sidney. "We have opened the door of our hide out to one or two of them since we have been here."

"I know that; but we picked them up in the swamp in broad daylight. They didn't come in the dark, as this chap does, and with that signal on their lips. Why, our mothers don't know it."

"But don't your fathers and elder brothers know it?" asked Ned Marsh.

"Two heads are better than one, if one is a Yank's head," exclaimed Tom, who instantly became so excited that he could scarcely stand still. He felt for Ned's hand in the dark, and when he got hold of it he worked it up and down like a pump handle. "That's one of our people out there, as sure as you're born. Give him an answer, boys. My lips won't get into the right shape, with all my trying."

"Don't be too hasty in jumping at conclusions," cautioned Ned, who was not a little surprised at the flutter which his chance inquiry had occasioned among the boys around him. "Think and hope what you please, but don't be in a hurry to expose yourselves to an attack. I wish we had a dark lantern."

"We've got one," answered all the boys at once. "What do you want to do with it?"

"I think it would be a good plan for a couple of us to go out there quietly, and see who that fellow is. As soon as we can locate him we'll cover him, and keep him covered until he satisfies us that he is all right. I will go for one."

"It will bring on a fight, won't it?" inquired Sidney.

"Who cares if it does?" answered Ned. "Then this terrible suspense will be ended, and we shall know just what we've got before us. If we've got to fight, let's get about it at once."

"But the moment you flash the lantern on that fellow, if you succeed in finding him, it will become a target for the rifles of all his friends," objected Frank, who, although he hoped and almost believed that the man who had given the signal was one who had a right to have it, was afraid to run any risks.

"I will manage the lantern myself, and when I turn on the light I will take care to hold it so that the boy who goes with me cannot be seen by any concealed marksman," answered Ned. "I will take my chances, and do what I can to shield my companion."

"Your idea is a good one, and I will help you carry it out," said Sidney, quietly. "If we don't make him show his colors, he may keep us trembling with apprehension all night long. More than that, if there is danger about we want to know it, so that we can warn Luke and Joe before they run into it."

Having made up his mind that the man who had intruded his unwelcome presence into their neighborhood should be made to reveal his identity without much ado, Sidney lost no time in getting ready to put Ned's plan into execution.

He found and lighted the dark lantern, leaving the slide open about a quarter of an inch, so that he and Ned could see to shove off Sam's canoe. The young officer unhooked his sword and handed it to Tom, but left his revolver in the holster, while Sidney armed himself with a heavy double barreled shot gun.

As soon as they were fairly seated in the dugout, Sidney in front to let down the bars and act as pilot, they pushed off into the darkness.

The passage which led from the camp to the open swamp was so narrow that they could not use their paddles to any advantage, so they worked their way along by pulling at the cane on each side of them, Sidney calling a halt every now and then to take down and lay aside the wires that communicated with the alarm bells.

As he could not see any landmarks to guide him in his search for the wires, Ned wondered how it was possible for him to find them all; but he must have succeeded in doing it, for Tom and Frank afterward told him that Sidney performed this delicate piece of work so skillfully that he did not bring the faintest tinkle from the box.

After a long interval of suspense and careful maneuvering, Ned discovered that it was not as dark as it had been. They had worked their way out of the thicket, and the canoe was resting on the almost currentless waters of the open swamp, but entirely concealed from the view of any one who might happen to be in the vicinity, by the dense shadow of the cane which grew close beside it.

While Ned was looking all around to find something suspicious, Sidney's trained eyes were fixed upon an object that attracted his attention the instant the canoe was clear of the bushes. He put his hand behind him and gave Ned's leg a pinch. The young officer did not understand the signal, if such it was intended to be, but he saw his companion pick up his gun and raise it slowly and cautiously to his face, and this told him that the time for action had arrived.

Quickly seizing the lantern, which he had placed between his feet on the bottom of the canoe, Ned threw back the slide, and in a second all that part of the swamp grew as bright as noonday.

The blinding glare of the bull's eye fell squarely

upon the face of a big whiskered man in gray uniform, who sat in a dugout a short distance away, and who was plainly much astonished to find himself so suddenly confronted by a dazzling light and the black muzzle of Sidney's double barrel. Until that instant he did not know that there was any one near him, any more than Ned Marsh knew that the rebel himself was almost within reach of his paddle.

"Throw up your hands and speak quick!" commanded Sidney; while Ned, mindful of his promise, backed away from him as far as he could, and held the lantern high above his head, taking care, however, to keep it focused upon the face of the rebel, who promptly laid his paddle across the canoe in front of him, and raised his open hand in the air.

"And while you are talking, bear in mind that a regiment of men can't save you if you try to play any tricks upon us," added Ned. "We've got you covered, and the slightest sign of treachery will be the signal for your death."

"I don't blame you for the precautions you are taking," said the man, in a quiet tone; and as soon as Ned heard his voice he told himself that they had to do with one who always kept a level head on his shoulders, and who knew what danger was. "If you will let me put my hand into my breast pocket, or if you will come alongside and put your hand there, you will find some letters that will show you who and what I am. I am a Union spy."

Sidney raised his head and looked at Ned over the stock of his ready gun long enough to ask: "Did you ever hear of a Union spy prancing around in a rebel uniform?" and then dropped his eye along the barrel again, and covered the middle button on the man's jacket, as before.

Before Ned could reply the man electrified him by saying, in the same calm steady voice:

"My name is Proctor, and I am pretty well known to some of the officers serving under Admiral Porter, although I do not remember to have seen that gentleman before," nodding at Ned.

"Your name is Proctor, is it?" exclaimed Ned, and Sidney wondered what made his voice tremble. "Tell me what boat you boarded at Lake Providence three weeks ago, who sent you there, and who ordered you to tell her commander that the proposed overland passage from the lake to Red River was impracticable."

"It was the Benton," replied the man, promptly. "And I was——"

"The Benton wasn't within a hundred miles of there," answered Ned, with suppressed fury. "You're a fraud of the first water! Shoot him, Sid. He's got friends close at hand."

Before the astonished Sidney could act upon this suggestion, or protest against it, the young officer's last words were verified in a most startling manner. A rifle cracked, a bullet sped through the air, and the dark lantern was smashed to pieces in Ned Marsh's hand.

CHAPTER XIV.

A VISITOR AND A TRAP.

"Well, gentlemen," observed Colonel St. Clair, renewing the conversation which I interrupted at the close of the eleventh chapter, "that cunning old darky has showed himself to be too smart for us this time, and we might as well give up the search and look for a place to go into camp. His presence proves that Luke Bennett's hide out is at no great distance from here, and I think the best thing we can do is to reconnoiter this part of the swamp very carefully before going elsewhere. We've got a faint trail, and we don't want to drop it until we reach the end of it."

It was, indeed, a very faint trail that they had stumbled upon, and whether or not they would have succeeded in following it, if they had been left to their own devices, is a question that cannot now be answered; but, as luck would have it, something happened that night which gave them the very information they wanted. It was something, too, that put in jeopardy the life of every man and boy who was engaged in it.

Having decided to establish a permanent camp, and make it the basis of operations against Luke Bennett and his band of refugees, the next thing was to find a spot of dry ground on which to build that camp.

This proved to be a matter of no little difficulty,

and the day was well spent before they discovered a place that was at all suited to their purpose. The little island rested on a very insecure foundation, for Ike Bishop, who was the first one to land upon it, could stand in the middle of it and shake it to its circumference by simply bending his knees and straightening them out quickly. If it had not been anchored by the roots of the trees that grew upon it it would have floated off into the bayou.

But it was that or nothing, so the members of the party threw off their coats, seized their axes and went to work. They quickly put up a commodious lean to, under whose friendly roof they piled fragrant boughs to the depth of a foot or more to keep their beds off the damp ground; the canoes were unloaded and a fire started, over which Ike Bishop fried the bacon and prepared the parched corn coffee.

By the time darkness settled down over the swamp they were snugly housed, and no one would have suspected that there was a camp there had it not been for the reflection of their fire upon the branches of the trees over their heads. But then these men had no enemies to fear, and there was no need for them to hide their camp, as Luke and his companions had hidden theirs.

"I suppose that when we invite ourselves to supper in Luke Bennett's hide out, Ike will be able to give us a better meal than this," said Captain Griffin, as he fished a slice of bacon out of the frying pan with his pocket knife, and laid it upon his slice of corn bread. "I see no reason why those boys should not live about as well as they did at home."

"Nor me," exclaimed Ike. "They've got cows to give 'em milk an' butter, an' niggers to raise gyarding truck for 'em; an' the people in the settlement do say that they used to make long trips with that thar gyarding truck in them canoes of theirn,

an' that when they come back they'd have piles an' piles of store tea an' coffee, an' shoes an' good clothes an' all manner of sich. They traded with the gunboats, dog gone 'em. They give aid an' comfort to the enemy by bringin' of 'em good taters an' things to eat, an' that's forbid by the law."

"So it is, Ike," assented the colonel, "and it is all Ryder's fault. He ought to have kept the families of those of us who are fighting for the South above want with that company of his. The unarmed steamers that ply on the river would afford him a fine field for his operations. They are always well found, and, if he were a man of any energy at all, he could have captured and burned dozens of them before this time, and filled the settlement with supplies of all kinds, besides giving the Yanks no end of trouble. I know I could have done it, but instead of that my wife and daughters have been compelled to accept assistance at the hands of women they loathe on account of their Union sentiments."

"'Tain't right, sich things ain't," said Ike. "I am fightin' an' bleedin' for the 'Federacy every day, an' my mam has to go barefoot, while the mothers of them boys who dassent come out an' put on a gray jacket has gunboat shoes to wear. Dog gone sich doin's, any way! Say, kurnel, how much'll my shar' of Luke Bennett's money be when we get it?"

"I am sure I don't know," was the reply. "It ought to be something handsome. I think I may safely promise that you will be able to go over to Vicksburg and buy your mother a pair of shoes."

"Shaw!" said Ike, who was very much disappointed. "Is that all I'll get for runnin' the risk of gettin' my mam's house burnt up over her head? If I was sure of it I'd turn loose from this here party to onct an' go to huntin' meat. I *did* think that I'd get as much as five or six thousand dollars."

"Why, Ike," replied the colonel, who wondered what the boy would think if he knew that four members of that party, himself included, confidently expected to pocket at least twenty thousand dollars apiece when the treasure that Luke Bennett and his friends had concealed should be brought to light; "a pair of good shoes are not to be sneezed at, especially in cold weather. They are worth seventy five dollars."

"Not in good money, though," answered Ike, who was not quite so much of a simpleton on some points as he was on others.

"Don't you call that good money?" demanded the colonel, pulling out his pocketbook and exhibiting a twenty dollar Confederate bill. "Wait until Bragg's army gets over into Ohio, and see how glad the Yanks will be to take it in exchange for their goods!"

"Course they'll be if we p'int our guns at 'em an' tell 'em they must. I tell you, kurn, it'll be a long time before that thar money will buy as much grub an' clothes as twenty dollars in Yankee gold'll buy."

Ike Bishop showed considerable sense when he made this statement. In less than a year from that time the Confederate dollar was worth just two cents in gold, and all the necessaries of life commanded unheard of prices.

Hams were worth three hundred dollars apiece, flour was six hundred dollars a barrel, sugar thirty dollars a pound, salt one dollar, and butter and beef forty dollars a pound; a turkey which graced the head of a Richmond table on that Christmas day was estimated to be worth a hundred and fifty five dollars; the cabbages, potatoes and hominy that flanked it cost a hundred dollars; the meal of which the corn bread was made was valued at eighty dollars a bushel, and the "store" coffee which came

after the dinner, and of which the hostess could allow her guests but a single cup apiece, was worth a hundred dollars a pound.

At the time of which I write these things were high enough and scarce enough; and I don't know that I wonder at Ike Bishop and Colonel St. Clair for being so spiteful against the stay at home Union people about them, who were able, by good management, to live so much better than the wives and children of those who went into the army.

"If that thar money of ourn is so powerful good, how does it come that we uns always s'arch the Yanks we find on the battlefield, an' take the greenbacks outen their pockets afore we lay a finger onto their shoes, an' other things we uns need to w'ar?" continued Ike, whose questions showed that he had learned to keep his eyes open since he went into the army. "I don't know of a single feller in our reg'mint who wouldn't ruther have greenbacks than our own money, every day in the week. Say, kurn, do you think my shar' will be enough to get me a commission?"

"A commission? We don't buy and sell commissions in this country as they do in England."

The colonel thought he had never heard of such a piece of impudence before. Wouldn't this uncouth fellow cut a pretty figure in an officers' mess? It was his business to be content to stay in the ranks and handle a musket; but the colonel dared not tell him so, for fear that Ike would pack up his traps and clear out, leaving the rest of them to prosecute their search alone.

Ike knew more about the swamp than they did, for he had done little but roam about in it since he was big enough to shoulder a gun, and they needed him for a guide; so the colonel sought to drive away the gloomy look on his face by saying:

"Find Luke Bennett's hiding place for us and help us capture him, and I will guarantee you five thousand dollars in gold. More than that, I will mention your services to your commander, and at my request he will keep an eye on you and give you every chance to work your way out of the ranks. Brave men and good soldiers are always in demand for higher positions, and I can see no reason why you——"

The colonel suddenly paused and bent his head in a listening attitude, while his companions looked inquiringly at one another, and reached rather hurriedly for their weapons. The very slight sound which attracted their attention would not have been noticed at all in the day time, but now it aroused their suspicions.

"Red squirrels do not frequent a country that has been under water as long as this one has, and besides, they don't roam the woods at night," said the colonel, looking up at the trees over his head. "The light from our camp fire has been seen by somebody, and that chirping is intended for a signal."

"Mebbe it's one of them fellers, who has lost his way an' don't know which way to go to find the hide out," suggested Ike Bishop.

"I thought of that," said Captain Griffin.

"So did I," answered the colonel. "Ike, you stay here and reply to him, and the rest of us will station ourselves behind the lean to out of sight, and be ready to cover him the moment he shows himself. Bring him up if you can, and remember that if it is one of Luke Bennett's party, you may have five thousand dollars in your pocket by this time to-morrow."

Ike's heart beat high with pleasurable anticipations, and when the last of his companions had followed Colonel St. Clair behind the lean to, he set

himself to work to draw the invisible party outside into the trap set for him.

Ike could imitate anything, from the love notes of a quail to the wild scream of a hawk ; and the long, shrill chirp he sent up in answer was perfect in its execution, while its result was perfectly gratifying.

The signal was given again, and as promptly responded to; and presently a slight commotion among the bushes told Ike that the stranger was pushing his canoe toward the island. Then he stopped and listened for a while, as if he wanted to make sure of his reception before going any closer to the camp fire, and finally he called out :

"Hello, in there! Don't shoot. I'm a friend."

"That voice doesn't belong to Luke Bennett or any of his friends," said the colonel, stepping from his place of concealment and whispering the words close to Ike's ear. "It's a man. Tell him not to be afraid, but to come on; we're friends, too, remember, but don't tell him whether we're Union or rebel until you find out who he is. Now, show how smart you are, and I will promise you six thousand dollars out of Luke Bennett's money."

Although these words were spoken so rapidly that they seemed to come out of the colonel's mouth all at once, Ike grasped their meaning, and made the mental resolution that he would do something to earn that extra thousand. So, as soon as the colonel went back to his hiding place, he said, in low but distinct tones:

"I'm a friend, too, so come on an' don't be afeared."

"What are you doing in there?" asked the man.

"Meat hunting," was Ike's reply. "Got lost an' had to camp right whar the dark ketched me."

"How many of you are there?" was the next question.

"Nobody but jes' me," answered Ike, while the

colonel nodded and winked to his friends behind the lean to, as if to say that their guide was not as big a fool as he looked to be.

By this time the man must have become satisfied that he had stumbled upon the camp of a belated bear hunter, for he did not hesitate any longer. He pushed his way through the bushes into the circle of light thrown out by the fire, and presently Ike was gazing at a tall, broad shouldered man with long brown whiskers, who was dressed in the uniform of a Confederate captain.

"Who are you?" he demanded, returning Ike's stare with interest, at the same time lifting a heavy revolver from the bottom of his canoe and resting it carelessly across his knee.

"Who, me? I'm Luke Bennett."

"You are?" exclaimed the visitor, who seemed to be very much pleased. "Then you're the boy I want to see. I have just escaped from Vicksburg with your father's help, and I have brought you several letters from your friends over there."

"Hey yoop!" was the mental exclamation. "I've ketched somebody, sure pop. If he ain't a deserter, then he's a spy. Bully for me!"

CHAPTER XV.

MOVING UPON THE HIDE OUT.

Ike Bishop was a big feeling boy about that time He had "ketched somebody sure pop," and that was an exploit that his commanding officer up in Tennessee would not permit to pass unnoticed, especially if Colonel St. Clair held to his promise, and spoke a good word for him. Ike gloated over this reflection for a minute or two, and then another thought came into his mind, or rather a whole train of them.

In trying to straighten them out so that he could could understand them, Ike, whose perceptions were none of the clearest at any time, found that he was getting things sadly "muddled." Who was this man who was so ready to declare that he had escaped from Vicksburg with the help of Luke Bennett's father, and that he had letters in his possession which Mr. Bennett and his conscripted companions had written to their friends at home?

Ike had a vague idea that his visitor's unexpected coming would result in bringing all the hated Unionists in the settlement into serious trouble; but just how it was going to be brought about, he could not determine. He began to think it about time for the colonel to come out and take the visitor off his hands; but that gentleman preferred to wait until the brown whiskered man had fully committed him-

self, before he sprang from his place of concealment and made a prisoner of him.

While Ike was wondering what he ought to say next, the visitor continued:

"My name is Proctor, and I am a Union spy. I was captured away up country by some of Van Dorn's men, and sent to Vicksburg to be tried and shot; but I found friends, your father and Mr. Ramsay and Mr. Barron among the number, who helped me out of one of the worst scrapes I ever got into. They told me about where to find your hide out, gave me the signal, and intrusted these letters to my keeping. Of course you know your father's handwriting?"

While Proctor (if that was his name) was talking in this way he came ashore, and took some letters from his pocket, one of which he handed to Ike. He stood over the boy and saw him turn the envelope upside down and fasten his eyes upon the address, and then it seemed to dawn upon him, all on a sudden, that there was something in the situation that did not look just right. How did it come, he asked himself, that so refined and well educated a man as he knew Mr. Bennett to be, could have such an ignorant boor as this boy was for a son?

"Are you quite sure that you are Luke Bennett?" said he.

"Didn't I answer your signal fair an' squar'?" asked Ike, in reply.

"You did, but you can't act out the part you have assumed, for reasons best known to yourself," replied Proctor, laying hold of the butt of his revolver, which he had put under his arm when he took the letters from his pocket. "You don't know enough to hold that letter right side up. What's your game, my lad? Speak the truth this time, or——"

"Drop that and throw up your hands!" com-

manded the stern voice of Colonel St. Clair; and the brown whiskered man looked up to find four cocked guns looking him straight in the face.

"You have been very neatly trapped, my man, and Ike, you played your part to perfection," said the colonel, holding out his hand for the letters which Ike promptly surrendered to him. "You told the truth on one point, at all events, for these documents are genuine. This one is from that traitor, Bennett. He was a near neighbor of mine before the war, and I know his writing. Now then, sir, who are you?"

"If you want a straight story out of me, tell me who and what *you* are," replied the prisoner, in a calm voice. "If you do not choose to do that, bang away. I expect to lose my life in the service, but I would rather die in battle than be shot by my own friends."

"I admire your pluck," said the colonel, who knew a brave man when he saw him, "and I really wish I could believe you to be a friend. Fortunately, we are not ashamed of ourselves, and I don't mind satisfying your curiosity. There is my leave of absence for thirty days. Do you see any signature upon it that you recognize?"

"I do," answered the prisoner, "and if you will let me take my hands down for just one minute, I will show you a paper that bears the same name."

The colonel nodded assent, and the prisoner began fumbling with one of the buttons on his jacket. It was a hollow button, made on purpose for men who followed his perilous line of duty. He unscrewed the top, and took from it a very thin piece of paper, on which appeared these words:

C. S. Belden is a Confederate spy.

Below them was written the name of a noted rebel general.

"Now, I am surprised, as well as convinced that you are a friend," said the colonel, picking up the revolver and politely restoring it to its owner. "We have often heard of you up in Tennessee, but we never had the good fortune to set eyes on you before. Sit down. Of course you will not object to a few questions?"

"Certainly not. But perhaps I could do better talking if you would give me a bite to eat. You see, I am masquerading as an escaped prisoner, and of course it wouldn't look well for me to go about with a supply of provender in my canoe. I haven't eaten anything since I set out early this morning."

Captain Griffin nodded to Ike, who at once began to bestir himself about the fire, while the colonel began questioning the guest, with a view to finding out how much he knew about the army to which he professed to belong. The sequel proved that he knew all about it; and he was so prompt in giving answers, and went so fully into the details of certain secret movements with which no one except those who were high in authority could by any possibility become acquainted, that the colonel soon expressed himself as satisfied.

"Now, before I tell you my story, I should like to ask your young man one question," said the spy, nodding at Ike, who straightened up, rested his hands upon his hips, and requested him to "bang away." "It is this," continued the stranger. "Why did you tell me that your name was Luke Bennett? You could have had no means of knowing that he was the very boy I wanted to find."

"Course not," replied Ike; "but you see I've been through a heap of fights, countin' in Fort Henry and Donelson, an' I've done a power of shootin' an' killed whole piles of Yanks. I did think that mebbe the folks in Vicksburg had heard of my doin's, an' I was

afeared that if I told you what my name was, you'd git scart and run off afore the kurn could see you."

Ike's hearers were profoundly astonished at this answer, and some of them showed a great desire to laugh at it. The truth was, Ike was so overwhelmed with a sense of the responsibility that the colonel had put upon him, that he forgot his own name, and gave the first one that came into his mind.

"Well, it served your purpose, and drew me into a trap I shouldn't like to be in if I were what I said I was," replied the spy. "As it has turned out, I am more than satisfied, for I shall have help to carry out my plans."

"You gave your name as Proctor," said Captain Griffin. "Is there such a man in the Federal service?"

The spy answered that there was, and this brought him at once to his story, which I will give in my own words.

I must begin by saying that this man Proctor, whose name Captain Belden had assumed, was one of the most singular characters that any war ever produced. On the pay rolls of Grant's army he appeared by the name I have given (whether it was his real name or not I do not know to this day), as a captain of cavalry; while in the Confederate General Chalmers's army he went by the name of Pollard, and drew pay as major of infantry. His Confederate friends would have been willing to stake their lives on his loyalty to the South, and when Van Dorn had him arrested because one of his well planned expeditions had failed miserably, there was a general howl of indignation. Van Dorn was sure that he had evidence enough to hang him, but when he came to look for it, he couldn't find it; so he forwarded him to Pemberton, for whom he had done considerable scouting.

Captain Belden then went on to say that he was present when Pollard was brought before the general, in company with a long letter of explanation from Van Dorn, and that he was angry as well as surprised to learn that one of his most valued and trusty men had fallen under suspicion. He declared that he knew him to be Major Pollard, and nobody else, but ordered him into the guard house until he could find time to look into his case.

Captain Belden said he did not know what put it into his head, but from the very first something told him that Pollard, the dashing cavalry leader and Confederate spy, and Proctor, the infamous Union spy, whom everybody had tried to kill and couldn't, were one and the same; but when the captain communicated his suspicions to General Pemberton, that officer was so mad that he ordered him out of his presence.

"But *was* it Proctor?" exclaimed the colonel, who was so impatient to get at the bottom of the mystery that he could not wait for Captain Belden to tell his story in his own way.

"Of course it was, and I was the only one who suspected it," was the reply. "After Pemberton ordered me to clear out and never darken his doors again, I went home and wrote out a plan, which I submitted to him the next day, after he had had time to get good natured. He approved of it, because he believed I would have my trouble for my pains, and told me to go to work.

"The first thing I did was to have Proctor transferred from the guard house to a rickety old building on the outskirts of the city, and my next to have men of well known Union sentiments detailed for his guards. They were told to keep a close watch over their prisoner, for he was a notorious Union spy, a desperado besides, and he would be sure to at-

tempt escape, if they gave him the least chance. I also put other watchers over him, that neither Proctor nor his guards knew anything about—tried and trusted men, Confederate to the backbone, who were stationed in an adjoining room to listen to, and make a note of, every word that passed between the prisoner and the sentries. The plan worked admirably, and in less than twenty eight hours I presented myself before Pemberton with a mass of evidence that almost made him gasp for breath."

"Proctor began trying his arts upon the sentries at once, I suppose?" said Captain Griffin.

"Yes, and they gave him all the aid and comfort they could. They told him about their boys who were hiding in the swamp to keep from getting into the army, directed him how to go to find their place of concealment, told him what the signal was, and also gave him a piece of information of which I was very glad to get hold."

When Ike Bishop heard this, he straightened up and began to look wild. The colonel, who knew what question he would ask if he were allowed to speak, scrowled fiercely at him, but for once his black looks had no effect upon Ike. The latter was harassed by a terrible fear, which he wanted set at rest at once.

"It wasn't—it wasn't—was it about the money?" he faltered.

"Money?" repeated Captain Belden. "What money?"

"Why, there's an absurd story going the rounds of the settlement, that all those Union men have fabulous treasures concealed somewhere in this swamp," said Colonel St. Clair, in a tone which seemed to say that he had no patience with one who could put any faith in such a report.

"No, they didn't say anything about that, and I

shouldn't have paid the slightest attention to it if they had. I have heard of such things before, and have wasted valuable time in looking for buried treasure, but I never found any," answered Captain Belden. "The information I was glad to get hold of was this: We have lost a good many people by desertion lately, and Bennett told Proctor that these boys had helped every one of those deserters on to their homes. It seems they have established an underground railroad through there, and my principal object in coming out and passing myself off for Proctor, is to find out right where that railroad is located, so that I can come back with a squad of men and break it up. But if you gentlemen will give me the help I need, the business can be done at once, this very night."

"Hey yoop!" shouted Ike, who was eager to get ready without a moment's delay. "Say, mister, when we ketch them fellers, you will give me leave to give Luke a good punchin' to pay him for the lickin' he give me when the war first come to this country, won't you? But how about my six thousand dollars?" he added to himself. "Will this new capting, who has come here without nobody askin' him, want some of it?"

When this question suggested itself to Ike's mind, his enthusiasm subsided on the instant.

"Unless I have lost my bearings—and I am not in the habit of doing that—I venture to assure you that Luke Bennett's hide out is within rifle shot of this camp," continued Captain Belden. "Pollard, or Proctor as I ought to call him, was given points and distances in black and white, and I studied them until I made myself master of them. He hadn't been confined in that building more than three days before he began laying his plans to escape, as I knew he would, and Bennett and his four friends

gave him all the help they could, which was just what I expected. They gave him a part of their provisions every day, furnished him with a rope to let himself down from the window, and when everything was ready, Proctor slipped down and out."

"An' you uns let him go?" exclaimed Ike, in great excitement. "Dog gone sich a way of doin', anyhow!"

"We didn't let him go any farther than we wanted him to go," answered Captain Belden, with a smile. "Before he had gone two hundred yards he was quietly surrounded, all the letters that had been intrusted to him, as well as the weapons with which he had been provided, were taken away from him, and he was marched off to jail and put in irons. At the same time two or three details of men, who had been ordered to hold themselves in readiness for that particular purpose, took Bennett and his four friends in out of the wet."

"Do you mean to say that Luke Bennett's pap, an' Joe Ramsay's, an' Frank Barron's, is shet up, too?" Ike almost shouted, jumping to his feet and kicking over the cup of parched corn coffee which he had prepared for the guest.

"That's what I mean," replied the captain.

"I'll very soon have another cup ready for you, mister," said Ike, apologetically, "but that's the best piece of news I have heared sence I come from up country. Luke Bennett's pap is locked up! Hey yoop! Will they hang him?"

"They ought to," answered the colonel.

"Course they oughter," exclaimed Ike, giving the bacon in the frying pan a vicious shake. "But even if they do, that won't settle my leetle bill with Luke Bennett. He's got to be whopped afore him an' me'll be square on the books."

"Of course I took the letters directly to head-

quarters, where they were opened and read," said Captain Belden, in conclusion. "After that they were carefully sealed up again, and I started out to find and break up that underground railroad.

"Now, if I were in your place, colonel, I wouldn't tear those letters open again until this business has been settled. It may be necessary for me to go into their camp in order to find out everything about them and their surroundings that I want to know, and if they see that their letters have been tampered with, they will suspect me at once, provided they are the sharp fellows I take them for; and I am of the opinion that my life would not be worth a moment's purchase."

"They ain't sharp at all, an' you needn't be afeared of 'em, nuther," said Ike, who could not bear to hear the least thing said in favor of the boys he so cordially hated. "They're cowards, the whole lot of 'em."

"But even a coward may be able to send a bullet with a true aim," said the colonel, "and the captain is wise in taking every precaution to avoid exciting their suspicions. As they are well acquainted with every member of our party, we shall have to keep out of sight until the time for action arrives," he added, passing the letters back to the captain. "Now, while you are eating the supper, which I see Ike has got ready for you at last, suppose you tell us what your plans are, so that we may know just how to act."

The captain replied that he had no plans beyond those of which he had already spoken. His intention was to gain admittance to Luke's hide out by passing himself off for Proctor the Union spy (the letters he had in his possession, one of which was written for the use of the *real* Proctor, would aid him in accomplishing that object); ascertain exactly

where the hide out was located, so that he could find it again at any time; pry into as many of the boys' secrets as he could, and learn what means they had of defending themselves in case they were attacked; and, after getting all the information he could, and throwing the boys off his track by inquiring the shortest route to the river, he would bid them good by, and start for Vicksburg by a roundabout way.

"I don't suppose that Luke or any of his friends ever heard of Proctor," said the captain, taking a sip of the scalding hot decoction that Ike Bishop called coffee, "but still——"

"Perhaps they never did hear of him," interrupted the colonel, "but it's just possible that the Yank that old Sam picked up this morning, and whom we believe to be a gunboat officer, may know who he is."

The captain looked his surprise, and Colonel St. Clair went on to tell that they had seen the negro scooting through the swamp that morning with a Yankee close in his wake, and that both had succeeded in making good their escape, in spite of the shower of bullets and buckshot that had been sent about their ears.

"That puts a different look on the matter. Proctor has been aboard nearly every gunboat in the fleet, and if that officer has ever seen him—— You think that nigger took him to Luke's hide out, and that he is there yet, don't you? Well, if that officer has ever seen the real Proctor, this will be the last piece of work I shall ever do for the Confederacy," said Captain Belden, shutting one eye, and gazing thoughtfully with the other into his cup of coffee. He little dreamt how prophetic were these words of the fate that was to befall him before the rays of the next morning's sun illuminated the dark recesses of

the swamp. "Something told me that this was going to be a ticklish job, and now I am sure of it. I've got to run a bigger risk than I bargained for."

"Wal, then, why don't you back outen it afore you go any furder?" inquired Ike.

The look of indignant contempt which he received in reply was so overwhelming that Ike wilted under it, and sat down on the opposite side of the fire out of sight. Captain Belden's superior officer had told him what to do, and, like the brave man he was, the captain intended to do it, if he lived long enough.

"If those are your plans, I don't see how we are going to help you, except in one way," observed the colonel. "We will make a start as soon as you have finished your supper, and if you will burn a match now and then, so that we can keep track of you, we will be within range, and hold ourselves ready to shoot the first one who attempts to do you injury."

"That's the only way you can help me," assented the captain. "If I succeed in getting into the hide out, come back to your camp, and await my return. When I come back, if I ever do, I will know more about Luke and his friends than I do now, and it will be but little trouble for us to decide upon a plan of attack. If they see anything about me to arouse their suspicions, why, then we shall have to fall back in good order, and return with force enough to carry everything before us."

This was all that was said on the subject, and after that they talked about different matters altogether —about everything, in fact, except the dangerous mission upon which they were so soon to enter, and from which they were not likely to return unscathed.

They conversed in low and earnest tones, as soldiers do when they are on the eve of going into action, and for once Ike Bishop allowed his thoughts to dwell upon something besides the money he hoped

to handle when Luke Bennett was captured, and the commission he expected to buy with it. He would not have shrunk from a fair fight with the object of his hatred, so long as the colonel would stand by and see that he didn't get whipped, but this thing of sneaking up to a concealed stronghold in the dark, not knowing at what instant he might be knocked out of his canoe by a charge of buckshot—well, Ike did not approve of that way of doing business, and he wished from the bottom of his heart that Captain Belden had stayed in Vicksburg.

"Now I think I am ready," said the latter, shutting up his jack knife and putting it into his pocket, after wiping the blade on the back of his boot. "By the way, do you know of a place on Rolling Fork that goes by the name of 'The Arbor?'"

Colonel St. Clair said he knew the spot well. It was a short, straight reach of the bayou, thickly lined on both sides with tall trees, whose entwining branches were so completely covered with mosses and climbing plants that the rays of the sun could scarcely penetrate through them. It looked more like man's work than Nature's, and that was what gave it its name.

"Well, my letter of instructions says: 'find the Arbor, hold a straight course to the eastward for two miles and a half, then give the signal, and you will be sure to get an answer.' Now, how far have I strayed out of my course?"

The colonel appealed to Ike, who said:

"You've got a right smart jump outen your way—as much as two miles, anyhow."

"We don't care to go clear back to the Arbor, because it would take too much time," observed the colonel. "What we want is to reach some point in the swamp abreast of it, and start from there. You understand what I mean, don't you?"

"And can you find your way to this camp again, if we should want to come back in the dark?" inquired Captain Griffin.

Ike nodded an affirmative to both these questions, and was commanded to get into the boat without loss of time, and lead the way. For an hour or more the canoes kept within seeing distance of one another, and when Ike stopped and announced that he reckoned they were just about even up with the Arbor, they drew together for a final consultation. It was soon over, and Captain Belden said, as he took his compass from his pocket and placed it on the bottom of his dugout:

"I will go on alone, burning a match occasionally to let you know where I am, and you must be sure and put yourselves out of sight the moment you hear me give the signal. Those boys may have some way of lighting up the swamp, you know. Keep me covered as well as you can, for I have an idea that I am going into a warm place. Good by."

The captain raised his hand to his hat, dipped his paddle in the water, and his canoe moved away into darkness out of sight. His parting words were the last that the colonel and his party ever heard from his lips.

In obedience to the instructions which Colonel St. Clair communicated to them in a whisper, the rest of the squad separated, and followed silently in the direction in which the captain had disappeared, each acting on his own account, but ready, at a given signal, to rally on their leader, who was near the center of the line. The light that blazed up at regular intervals in front of them, glowing brightly for a moment, and then dying away, was the only thing that kept them from being lost from one another in the swamp.

At last the colonel began telling himself that it

was high time the spy was seeing some signs of that hide out, if it were located anywhere about there, for they had surely come all of two miles since they separated.

As it happened they were close upon it. Already one of their canoes, or it might have been a paddle, had touched a concealed wire, and given to it a motion that had carried consternation to the hearts of four boys, who were hurrying about their narrow quarters on tiptoe, hiding the light of their camp fire, and asking one another what enemy it was that set the alarm bells sounding.

Presently the signal came clear and distinct to Colonel St. Clair's ears. When he heard it, he drew his canoe close alongside the nearest tree, picked up his rifle, and rested it across his knee.

CHAPTER XVI.

IKE'S RANDOM SHOT.

Having taken up a favorable position and placed his rifle across his knees in readiness for instant use, Colonel St. Clair looked up and down the swamp to see where his companions were, but could not locate a single one of them. The moment they heard the signal they had drawn in their paddles and grasped their weapons, and they were now anxiously waiting to see what was going to happen. They were all highly excited, especially Ike Bishop, who felt as he had often felt before when he was on the eve of going into battle.

The waiting was worse than the actual conflict, and Ike had to wait a long time, almost half an hour, before Captain Belden's oft repeated signals brought any response ; and when it came, it was in a way that excited Ike's profoundest amazement.

"I'd give something handsome to be in Cap Belden's shoes this minute, so't I could see what sort of a place it is he's lookin' at," said Ike to himself, at the same time lowering the heavy double barrel which he had held to his shoulder until his arms ached. "If he has found the hide out—an' if he hain't, I don't see what he's foolin' around thar for —why don't Luke answer the signal to let him know? Now, then, what's that, do you reckon?"

While Ike was communing thus with himself, Ned Marsh and Sidney Jones were hauling their canoe

slowly through the cane toward the open swamp; and now the blinding glare of their dark lantern was turned full upon the face of the Confederate spy.

Ike could see the latter very plainly, but he could not see anything else except a little ball of fire, which was so brilliant that it dazzled his eyes to look at it. Anything that Ike Bishop could not account for was sure to frighten him, and he began to tremble all over. He was in just the right humor to do something desperate without knowing a thing about it.

"Now, what is that thar, and whar did it come from, do you reckon?" continued Ike, looking all around in the hope of finding some one to explain the matter to him. "It looks jest like an eye of fire, don't it? Sh—! That's somebody thar, sure's you're born, 'cause I can hear them talking."

Although Ike listened with all his ears he could not catch a single word of the conversation that was carried on between the spy and the invisible person who managed the light, but he did hear an excited voice exclaim:

"Shoot him, Sid! He's got friends close by!" and something told him that if that lantern was not put out on the instant Captain Belden's life would be in danger; but Ike could not settle in his mind whether or not he ought to shoot at it without orders. While he was debating the point, Colonel St. Clair settled it for him, by raising his rifle and smashing the bull's eye.

"Hey yoop!" muttered Ike, who took this as a signal to commence firing. "That's me, every time! I only hope it's Luke Bennett that this charge of shot is goin' into, 'cause then——"

Without waiting to finish the sentence, and quite forgetting, in his frantic eagerness to do something, that he stood as good a chance of killing the friendly spy as of hitting Luke Bennett or one of his friends,



"SHOOT HIM, SID! HE'S GOT FRIENDS CLOSE BY!"

Ike raised his gun and fired both barrels in rapid successsion.

Then he dropped the weapon and threw himself flat in his canoe, in order to escape the return shot; but he was much too slow in his movements. Sidney Jones fired at the flash, and some of the buckshot in his gun must have found a lodgment somewhere in Ike Bishop's body, for the howls he straightway set up were wonderful to hear. They frightened his companions, who gathered about him without loss of time.

"Are you hit, Ike?" inquired the colonel anxiously.

"Course I be," replied the boy, in an injured tone. "Think I'm whoopin' this a way for fun?"

"Whereabouts are you hurt?"

"All over, dog gone the luck. I'm killed. I won't never get my six thousand dollars, an' no star to put onto my collar, nuther. I never did have good luck in this here world, anyhow."

The colonel, who dared not strike a light to examine Ike's wounds, waited impatiently for the return of the spy; but as the minutes wore away and he did not come, a horrible fear seized upon him, which he communicated in a whisper to his friends, the injured boy being too much taken up with his own troubles to pay any attention to him.

"We shall never see Belden again," said the colonel, solemnly. "Ike's random shot put an end to the wrong man."

"Oh, I hope not," exclaimed Captain Griffin.

"Can you account for Belden's absence in any other way?" asked the colonel. "The boys who handled that dark lantern, whoever they were, only fired once, and that charge couldn't have touched Captain Belden, for it hit Ike. They couldn't have made a prisoner of him, for Belden would die be-

fore he would let them do that. I broke the lantern on purpose, to give him a chance to escape; and if Ike's shot had not killed or disabled him, he would have been prompt to take advantage of my diversion in his favor."

In spite of the colonel's positive language, he clung to the hope that the spy had been able to slip away from the boys, in the darkness, and so did his companions; but as the minutes wore on and he did not appear, they were reluctantly obliged to confess that something must have happened to him. The spy knew exactly where he had left Colonel St. Clair and his party when he started on alone to find the hide out, and, if he were able to come back to them, what was the reason he did not do it?

"Poor fellow!" said the colonel, with a sigh of regret. "He said he expected to die in the service, but he didn't want to be shot by his friends. We can do nothing here, and we might as well return to camp. We know where Luke Bennett's hide out is, and the next time we visit it we will have force enough at our backs to take it by storm. I wish now that I had read those letters."

"It seems cowardly to go away without making an attempt to find our friend Belden," said Captain Griffin, as he made the painter of Ike's canoe fast to the stern of his own, "but I don't see what else we can do. Luke and his friends are on the alert, and it will be sure death to the man who shows himself to them."

While on their way to the camp, the colonel and his three friends were very silent and thoughtful, while Ike moaned continually, and thrashed about in his canoe at such a rate, that the rest of the party began to fear that his injuries might prove to be something serious; but when they got him to the fire and took a good look at him, their sympathy

gave place to anger and contempt. There were two or three buckshot in his cheek, and as many more in his arm; but they didn't see that that was any reason why he should keep up such a constant groaning. They had seen men with their arms carried entirely away by shots and shells, who did not make half the fuss that he did.

"I want to go hum to my mam!" whined Ike; and as there was no reason to suppose that he would be of any more use to the party, either as guide or cook, the colonel assured him that he should go there as soon as it was light enough for them to find the way.

They had little expected to go back in this sorry fashion—disappointed, and whipped by the boys they had hoped to rob—and there was not one among them who did not wish that they had devoted their time to hunting meat for their families, and had let Luke Bennett and his companions alone.

"We have been repulsed, but we are not beaten yet," said the colonel, when Captain Griffin gave utterance to these sentiments. "We have evidence enough to hang Bennett and his fellow conscripts, and as soon as I get home, I will write him a letter, telling him that if he will reveal the hiding place of his money, so that we can have it for the support of our families while we are in the army, fighting for the South, we will say nothing about the way in which Captain Belden met his death. If he won't do that, we will lay a full history of the matter before Pemberton. I think that will open Bennett's eyes and loosen his tongue; for, if Pemberton sends a company of men over here, they will come with orders to take Luke dead or alive, and to destroy the property of every Union man in the settlement."

There was a loud groan from Ike, who did not at

all approve of this way of doing. If a company of men came over from Vicksburg to avenge the death of the spy, they would be sure to unearth the hidden treasure (Ike labored under the delusion that all they had to do was to turn the hide out upside down in order to find it), and then what would become of his six thousand dollars?

This question excited a serious train of reflections in Ike Bishop's mind; and while the rest of the party sat around the fire, thinking about the spy who had been so suddenly and unexpectedly snatched from their midst, Ike, all unconscious of the mischief he had done, lay upon his bed of boughs and planned for the future.

"I can't go back to the army when my furlong's over, 'cause I'm wounded," said he to himself, "so I'll steer cl'ar of the kurn when I get hum, an' strike hands with Cap Ryder an' the rest of them fellers. I know whar the hide out is, an' they don't; an' I'll tell them that if they want me to show it to 'em, they must plank down ten thousand dollars the minute we find the money. By jinks, that's jest what I'll do, sure's you are born! He's more on the blow than he is on the do, Ryder is; but I reckon I can put a little life into him."

There was not much sleeping done in the camp that night, and all of them felt relieved when daylight came, and the hasty breakfast that Captain Griffin prepared had been disposed of.

By this time Ike Bishop had so far recovered his strength that he was able to sit up in his canoe and guide the party back to the spot from which they had set out on their hunt two days before. He was by no means as badly hurt as he pretended to be, and it is doubtful if any army surgeon would have excused him from duty for a single hour; but he assumed a very pitiful expression of countenance,

nursed his wounded arm tenderly, and repeatedly declared that he would not be able to go back to active service for at least three months to come.

Finally the colonel took the hint, and said, impatiently:

"Well, Ike, if you are not any better when I go back, I will see your commanding officer and ask him to have your leave extended. Now, keep still, and let us have a little peace."

Having gained his point, Ike could afford to keep still. No one heard a word of complaint from him after that.

A little while before dark, the party ran the bows of their canoes upon the shore at the back end of the old cotton field, and at once prepared to disembark. Ike caught up his gun and started post haste for the house, to tell his confiding mother some wonderful story about the terrible battle he had passed through the night before, while the others lingered to unload the canoes.

The supplies, of which they had consumed but a small portion during their short absence, were piled under the trees to await the coming of the wagon which Colonel St. Clair intended to send after them as soon as he reached home. This done, they went up to the house, caught and saddled their horses, which they had left in one of Ike Bishop's lots, and rode off down the lane.

It was pitch dark by this time, and they were glad of it, for there was no one abroad to ask them disagreeable questions about their hunt. They felt a good deal as Ryder and his guerrillas did after they had wrecked the houses of all the Union men in the settlement without finding the money of which they were in search.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE HOLLOW BUTTON.

Let us now return to Ned Marsh and Sidney Jones, whom we left in the dark a short time ago, their lantern having been extinguished by a bullet from Colonel St. Clair's rifle.

Taken by surprise as they were, the boys did not lose their presence of mind. Sidney did not shoot the spy, as he could have done very easily, and he would have looked upon such a proceeding as little short of deliberate murder. He simply kept him covered with his double barrel, while Ned dropped the remains of his lantern overboard, caught up the paddle and made all haste to back the canoe into the cane.

His prompt action put him and his companion out of harm's way, but it was fatal to the spy. A second later Ike Bishop's blunderbuss roared, and the man who had come so near betraying Luke Bennett and his friends into the hands of their enemies gave one groan and sank back upon the bottom of his canoe dead.

"Fire at the flash," whispered Ned Marsh, who was quick to comprehend the situation. "It may drive them back if they are advancing upon us."

Sidney acted upon the suggestion. He did not expect to accomplish anything by it, but the doleful howls that awoke the echoes of the swamp a moment

later made the cold chills creep all over him, and told him that some of the buckshot in his gun had flown closer to the mark than he wished they had.

"I declare, I have hit Ike Bishop!" exclaimed poor Sidney, who felt as if he had done something for which he never would be forgiven. "I would know his voice among a thousand."

"Well, don't worry over it," said Ned, encouragingly. "You haven't hurt him at all, or he wouldn't yell in that fashion. Think of what he was trying to do to you and the rest of us. Now, when I run alongside that canoe, you stand by to catch hold of it, and we'll tow it to camp. If that spy, or whatever he was, had any documents in his possession, it may be to our interest to take a look at them."

The outline of the spy's canoe could be dimly seen through the darkness, and it was the work of but a few seconds for Ned to paddle up within reach of it. The occupant lay motionless on the bottom.

"I am glad that I am in no way to blame for this," said Sidney, with a shudder. "It's horrible, isn't it?"

"Well—yes," replied the practical Ned. "But after you have seen as many men killed in action as I have, you will get used to it. This is no time for sentiment. We want to get under cover before they open fire on us again. Take the paddle and find the way back to camp, if you can, and I will hold fast to the canoe."

Sidney had no difficulty in discovering the passage that led through the cane to the hide out, and before he had pulled the canoes very far into it, he heard a voice close in front of him say, in low and earnest tones:

"Who is it? Speak quick!"

"It is I, Tom," replied Sidney. "What are *you* doing out here?"

"We came out to take a hand in the fight," was the reply. "What are you shooting at? Who was hurt, and who gave the signal?"

"It's a long story, boys," said Sidney, as he reached over the side of his canoe to replace one of the wires. "Let's go on to the hide out, and we'll tell it to you there. Duckfoot isn't hurt, and neither am I; but we have got a dead man in the canoe astern of us."

Tom Pike and his friend Frank were greatly alarmed by this announcement, and it was a long time before they could control themselves sufficiently to ask who he was.

"We never saw him before," answered Sidney, "but he meant harm to us, all the same. He tried to pass himself off for another man; but Ned told him he was sailing under false colors, and that was what brought on the shooting."

"Who shot?" inquired Frank.

"Colonel St. Clair and his party," replied Sidney. "Of course we didn't see them, but I answered the shot that killed the spy, and, until I receive convincing proof to the contrary, I shall believe that I hit Ike Bishop. If Ike was there, Colonel St. Clair and the rest of his crowd were not far away."

"What did I tell you, Tom?" exclaimed Frank Barron. "Didn't I say that it was Ike and nobody else who was taking on in that dreadful way? What damage did that rifle shot do, and who killed the spy?"

"The shot from the rifle broke our lantern in Duckfoot's hand, and we think it was Ike Bishop's double barrel that did the rest of the damage. Of course he meant those two charges for us, but Duckfoot was sharp enough to back our canoe out of the way, and that gave him fair range at the spy."

"But what induced you to bring him in here?" asked Tom. "Why didn't you leave him out there for his friends to take care of?"

"He is past revealing the secret of your hiding place now," said Ned, solemnly; "and I think he has some papers on his person that you boys ought to see. He said his name was Proctor, and then I knew he was a fraud, and that we'd got to look out for him. The ringing of those bells meant just what Sid said it did—treachery."

"Who is Proctor?" demanded Frank.

"A noted Union spy, who has done no end of good work for us," answered Ned. "But I am one of the few who have seen Proctor, and he looks about as much like this man as I look like old Sam. He is a small, stoop shouldered, loose jointed, insignificant looking fellow, while the spy looked every inch the soldier. I am sorry that he met his death in this way, for I am sure that he was a splendid man. Well, he took his chances, just as we all did when we came into the service, and they went against him. It may be my turn tomorrow."

As Sidney had by this time replaced all the wires, they went on to the hide out. They remained perfectly quiet for half an hour or more, waiting to see what the colonel and his party would do next; but, hearing nothing more from them, the boys finally removed the wet leaves and green boughs, with which they had smothered their fire, and started a little blaze.

"He said he had come over from Vicksburg, and that he had letters from our friends, did he?" said Tom, when Sidney had given a hurried and somewhat disconnected account of the short interview which he and Ned had held with the spy previous to the shooting. "Then it's a lucky thing that Duckfoot was with us. He saved us from capture,

beyond a doubt. I do hope there is no mistake about this business. If those people out there were friends instead of enemies, and this man should really—— By gracious, boys, I don't like to think about it!"

"Then think about something else," suggested Ned, who now proceeded to examine the pockets of the dead rebel, while the others gathered about the canoe, which had been drawn out upon the bank, and gazed sorrowfully at his pallid features. "We shall very soon know all about it. Ike made a center shot, didn't he? Both charges struck him fair in the breast, and some of the buttons on his jacket are broken all to pieces. Hal-lo here, what's this?"

The boys standing around were surprised to see Ned take his knife from his pocket and cut away one of the battered buttons, which he pried apart with the blade. This being accomplished, he drew from the inside of it a small piece of paper which had some words written upon it.

"C. S. Belden is a Confederate spy," said he, reading the words aloud and passing the paper over to Tom. "That sets your fears at rest, does it not? This man was a rebel, sure enough. Now, let us see if we can find something to tell where he got that signal, and what it was that brought him over here."

"He set up a trap for us and fell into it himself; but I feel sorry for him all the same," said Tom, little dreaming how soon his sorrow would be turned into anger, intense and bitter, against the man whom Ike Bishop's random shot had sent to his account. "Now, then, what have you got there?"

"I believe that I have got to the bottom of this plot," was all Ned Marsh had to say in reply.

He ran his eye hastily over the big bundle of let-

ters which he had taken from the inside pocket of the spy's jacket, and finally handed one of them to Tom Pike, who was utterly confounded to find that it was addressed to himself in his father's own familiar handwriting. Sidney Jones declared that the two letters that were given to him, one bearing his own name and the other his mother's, had been addressed by his father's hand; and Frank Barron said the same regarding the two that were passed over to him. They wondered what the meaning of it all could be, and looked toward Ned for an explanation.

"My idea is that Proctor has been captured at last," said the latter, who knew that the boys would not be satisfied until he had told what he meant when he said that he believed he had got to the bottom of the plot. "In some way or other he made the acquaintance of your friends in Vicksburg, who laid plans to aid him in making his escape; told him pretty nearly where to find your hide out; gave him the signal, and intrusted to him these letters, which were to be delivered to you."

"But you say this man isn't Proctor, and the paper you took out of his button proves him to be a rebel spy," exclaimed Sidney, who turned as white as a sheet and trembled all over. "How do you account for that?"

"I don't like to tell you what I am afraid of," answered Ned, who saw his own suspicions and misgivings reflected in the faces of the boys around him. "You can account for it as well as I can."

"Why, it can't be possible that—do you think—do you really believe——" faltered Tom.

"I do believe just that," replied Ned, who knew what the boy was trying to say. "In some way or other the plot was discovered, and this man took Proctor's place and lost his life by it."

"It served him just right," said Tom, who was so highly enraged that he scarcely knew what he was saying. "The plot for Proctor's escape was discovered, and of course our friends in Vicksburg——"

He hesitated again and waited for Ned to finish the sentence for him. The words he would have uttered seemed to stick fast in his throat.

"Have got themselves into serious trouble," said the young officer, knowing that there was nothing to be gained by trying to smooth the matter over. "Of course, too, those documents have all been read by the authorities in the city——"

"Yes, sir; they have," exclaimed Frank Barron, who was bending over the fire closely examining his letters. "Mine have both been opened, and stuck together again in the most bungling manner. Just look at them."

"And after you have done that, go into the hide out, strike a light and read what your friends have to say to you," suggested Ned. "Probably they will make everything clear to you. You had better take the others with you. They belong to Luke and Joe."

So saying Ned handed over the rest of the letters which he had taken from the person of the dead spy, and went on with his investigations to see what else he could find in his pockets, while Tom Pike and his companions hurried into the cabin.

With trembling hands they spread their letters upon the table, after the candles had been lighted, and while they read them with eyes that were full of tears, they often paused to express their astonish- at the correctness of Ned Marsh's conclusions. Although the latter had nothing to reason from except the outside of the envelopes which contained the letters, and the little piece of paper he had taken from

the spy's button, he had told as straight a story as Captain Belden could have told himself if he had been alive at that moment.

For a few minutes deep silence reigned in the hide out, broken only by the occasional rustling of a letter under the nervous hands of some excited reader, and then Sidney Jones laid his head upon the table and gave way to a violent outburst of grief. Some brave and encouraging, or perhaps some affectionate words, penned by the father whom he might never see again, and who at that very moment might be lying in the guard house under sentence of death, were too much for the boy whose patient endurance under the cruel separation had already been too severely tested, and he cried aloud in anguish of spirit.

In about half an hour Sidney and his friends came out of the cabin, and joined Ned at the fire. The latter could easily see that they were almost overwhelmed with grief, but, like the young heroes they were, they strove had to conceal it.

"Yes," said Sidney, in response to Ned's inquiring look; "it is just about as you thought. Proctor is a prisoner; our friends did all they could to help him, and beyond a doubt they signed their own death warrants by doing it. Of course the letters are full of hope and encouragement for us here at home, because they were written before the plot was discovered; but if the writers could drop us a line now, I am afraid they would have a different story to tell. Well, it's war time, and we've got to take what the fates bring us."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MEETING.

The sun does not often shine upon so angry and dispirited a lot of men as were Amos Ryder's guerrillas when they rode down the lane toward the crossroads, which they called their headquarters. They had wrecked the homes of all the Union men in the settlement, in the vain effort to find the money which the conscripted owners had secured and hidden away at the beginning of the war; and there were few among them who did not wish that they had not done it, and who did not tremble when they thought of the consequences of their rash act.

Luke Bennett and his four friends were peaceable, order loving boys, and quiet enough when they were let alone; but they were perfect tigers when they were aroused. And wouldn't they be thoroughly aroused when they learned how their defenseless mothers had that day been treated by men who had never met with anything but kindness and generosity at their hands?

"I, fur one, won't never dar' to show my nose outside my own bars any more of nights," said Harry Wiggins, voicing the sentiments of the men who rode near him. "I'm kinder sorry we smashed them thar pianners, 'cause thar wasn't r'ally no call for sich work."

"An' I don't for the life of me see why we ripped

up the floors and broke the cheers," observed another. "The money couldn't have been hid in no cheers. We done it jest 'cause we got so dog gone mad we couldn't hold in no longer; an' won't them boys be mad, too, when they hear of it? That's what's a botherin' of me."

"Wal, now, gentle*men*, let me talk to you uns for jest a minute," drawled Pete Williams.

As he spoke he threw his leg over the horn of his saddle, and drew his never failing cob pipe from his pocket. Instantly the eyes of all the men in his immediate neighborhood became fastened upon him, and those who were riding in front faced about and waited for him to speak.

For some reason or other Pete was looked upon as an oracle by his companions in arms, and his words always carried weight with them. He filled his pipe with great deliberation, borrowed a match of his file leader to light it, and then continued:

"We uns done well enough, we uns did, an' I, fur one, shouldn't by no means feel so bad about it if we had only got the money."

"That's good, sound argyment," assented Wiggins, looking around upon his companions, who nodded their approval.

"An' now I ask you uns, what's the reason we didn't get that thar money arter goin' to all the trouble we did, an' puttin' ourselves in the way of gettin' shot an' burned outen house an' home by Luke Bennett an' them friends of his'n? I say, it's 'cause we didn't have the right man at the head of us; that's what I say."

"An' I do think in my soul that you're right, Pete," said the man who had given him the match. "You're allers right in everything you say. We uns didn't have the right man at the head of us to manage things."

If one might judge from the winks and nods that were exchanged by the men who rode in that part of the line, this was the conclusion to which all the guerrillas had come; but by what process of reasoning they reached it, I don't pretend to know. Ryder had either broken or overturned everything that came in his way during his frantic search for the money, and how any commander could have done more than that, it is hard to tell. I do not suppose the guerrillas knew it, but it is nevertheless the fact, that in casting about to find some one upon whom to lay the blame of their failure, they were following in the lead of wiser people than themselves.

"Them's my sentiments, gentle*men*," continued Pete Williams, who was not a little elated to see that all the guerrillas within hearing of his voice were disposed to side with him; "an' I say it is high time that Ryder was kicked outen the position he ain't fitten to hold, an' that the command was give to the man who knows more about this business of sold'erin'—that's Kazier Bowles."

That was the name of Ryder's turbulent lieutenant (where he got the cognomen of Kaziah I am sure I don't know), who had long been expecting his friends in the company to make a move in his favor, and held himself in readiness to take advantage of it.

"An' I do think in my soul that you're right," said Pete's file leader. "You're allers right in everything you say. We uns never did have the right man at the head of us to manage things, an' I shouldn't wonder a bit if Bowles would do better'n Ryder. We might as well get the thing goin' now as any other time, an' Pete, if you'll do the talkin', we uns will back you up."

"Look wild thar, you uns!" shouted Captain Ryder, who rode at the head of the line. "Get pardners thar, an' go two an' two! Now halt! Now

turn yourselves around sideways an' look t'wards me! That's about the idee, an' I b'lieve it's what they call 'front' in the army, ain't it? Wal, the next time I holler 'front, you uns!' turn yourselves around like you be now. Wal, we uns have looked fur the money an' we ain't got it."

"No; but we've got five more enemies nor we had this mornin'," exclaimed Harry Wiggins. "I'm kinder sorry that we uns busted up things so bad, 'cause we didn't make nothing by it."

"Wal, then, why didn't them women trot out the money, like I told them to?" demanded the captain, fiercely. "I reckon the next time a Conf'd'rit officer speaks to 'em they'll pay some heed to him, won't they? I've s'arched the houses, like you uns wanted me to do, an' now what comes next?"

This was the time for Pete Williams; and after he had received a few winks and nods of encouragement from his friends, and as many prods in the ribs from the muzzles of loaded guns, he mustered up energy enough to speak out.

"Look a yer, capting," said he, in his drawling way, "I've got a few words to say to the boys, if you don't mind."

"Then back yourself out an' come around here in front, an' say 'em like a man," replied the guerrilla chief, who at once became suspicious that he was going to have a mutiny on his hands. If that was the case, he wanted the leader of it within reach of his arm, so that he could knock him out of his saddle at the first sign of insubordination.

"No, I reckon I'll set whar I am, 'cause I can talk jest as well from hyar as I can from out thar," replied Pete. "The few words that I want to say to the boys is this year: Be you uns willin' to foller any longer in the lead of the man who ain't brung us nothin' but bad luck—an' the very meanest kind of

bad luck at that—ever sence he put on that thar gray jacket an' sot himself up on that mu-el of his'n fur our capting? That's what I want to ask you uns."

These words created a sensation among the men, and Captain Ryder saw at a glance that there was trouble ahead. He was not the man to surrender his authority without a struggle, and he hoped by keeping up a bold front, and assuming a courage and confidence in himself which he was very far from feeling, to quell the mutiny before it had gone any further; but he very soon found that it had gone so far that he could not manage it.

"Peter Willyings," said he, fiercely, "if you had been up in the army when you spoke them sentiments a minute ago, do you know what the capting of your company would a done to you? Wal, he'd a shot you so dead that you wouldn't never kick, an' served you right, too. I won't do it this time, 'cause I ain't got my bear killer with me; but if you'll come out hyar in front, I'll larrup you till——"

"Then you'll have to larrup the hul company, I tell you," interrupted Lieutenant Bowles, who thought this a good time to say a word for himself. "Pete don't stand alone, does he, boys?"

"No, I don't reckon I do," said Pete, speaking for himself. "Git out from in front of me, Mr. Johnsing, an' let me through thar, will you?"

Mr. Johnson obligingly moved out of Pete's way, and the latter rode to the front and faced the guerrilla chief, who did not look as bold and warlike now as he did while he was engaged in that wanton destruction of furniture an hour or so before. He looked frightened, and of course that encouraged Pete to be as insulting as he pleased.

"We uns have had jest enough of you, Amos Ry-

der," said the spokesman, while all his comrades in the front rank moved forward to assist him in case he and the captain should come to blows; "an' we ain't a goin' to foller in your lead no longer. I tell you that you ain't the kind of a capting we uns are wantin', an' so you'd best git."

"Yes, Amos, you'd better be a-gittin'," shouted the men, who, if they had never before realized how totally unfit their leader was for the position he held, were fully sensible of it now. "Start up that ole lop eared mu-el o' your'n an' be a gittin'."

Captain Ryder could not see any chance to get away, and neither could his mule, for the angry guerrillas had completely surrounded them. The order to "be a gittin'" was emphasized by energetic thrusts from the sharp muzzles of as many rifles and double barrels as could be brought to bear upon the flanks of the mule, and when at last the patience of that much abused animal was all exhausted, he kicked right and left to such good purpose that he quickly cleared a way for himself, and made all haste to retreat through it.

"Here we go, dog gone our Confed'rit buttons!" shouted Ryder, bringing the flat of his saber down upon the mule's ribs with a sounding whack. "Git out of our way, everybody!"

This ungrateful treatment on the part of the master whom he had just carried out of the reach of his angry and excited men brought a bray of remonstrance and another vicious kick from the mule; but Captain Ryder, being on his guard this time, was not unhorsed as his comrades expected him to be.

He went down the lane at a furious rate of speed, and finally the jeers and yells of derision, which the exultant guerrillas sent after him, died away in the distance.

CHAPTER XIX.

RYDER'S CHANGE OF BASE.

Although Captain Ryder was astonished and bewildered by the suddenness with which he had been deprived of his command, he was not entirely overwhelmed by it. He was deeply mortified of course, but he was angry as well, and, instead of giving himself over to gloomy reflections, he at once began to cast about for some way to "get even" with the men who had so unceremoniously ousted him from his position as commander of the Home Guards.

"I ain't by no means sure that they've got the right to kick me out in that fashion," soliloquized ex-Captain Ryder, as he drew rein in front of the bars that gave entrance to his own domain; "but I ain't a carin' very much about that. What I don't like is their puttin' Kazier Bowles in my place. He'll get Luke Bennett an' the rest of them fellers down on the company wusser'n they be now. They'll ruinate everything that comes in their way, an' how shall I save myself an' the little property I've got left? That's what I'm tryin' to settle now, an' I reckon I'd best speak to Sally Ann about it."

Captain Ryder's wife was moving about the cabin, intent upon her household duties; but the rattling of the bars brought her to the door. She was a tall, muscular woman, and there was something aggressive in her way of flouncing out upon the porch.

Planting herself firmly on her feet, with her clenched hands upon her hips, she waited for the captain to say something; but as he showed no disposition to begin the conversation, she took her pipe out of her mouth long enough to ask:

"Did you find that money, Amos Ryder?"

"No, I didn't," growled the captain.

"I'm dog gone glad of it," said his wife, spitefully. "I knowed you wouldn't get it, but do you know what I was kalkerlatin' to do if you did find it? Wal, I was goin' to take Miss Bennett's shar' back to her to wunst, an' I was goin' to say to her: 'Miss Bennett, hyar's your money. You sent me the medicine that cured me of my fever 'n ager, an' I ain't a goin' to stand by an' let no husband of mine rob you; you can bet on that.' That's what I'd have said to Miss Bennett, Amos Ryder; an' now I want you to quit your galavantin' around the kentry, an' stay to hum whar you b'long. I'm gettin' teetotally tired of choppin' wood an' totin' all the water from the bayou, while you are foolin' around on that ole mu-el playin' soldier, an' I jest ain't goin' to stand it no longer. You Home Guards ain't nothin' but a nuisance, any way. One good sized Yank could run the hull on you."

"Wal, I ain't so sartin about that nuther," answered Amos, plucking up a little spirit. "But I do think in my soul that the company has ruinated herself by this day's work. They've kicked me out, an' put Kazier Bowles in my place as capting."

"I'm mighty glad to hear it," said his wife, again. "Seems like some on 'em has got a leetle sense, arter all. I knowed there was something the matter of you as soon as I put my peepers on to you. What be you goin' to do about it?"

"I'm goin' to give up trainin' with 'em now, and throw all the inflooence I've got on to the side of

Luke an' his friends. I'm goin' to help 'em every chance I get."

"Now you're talkin' like a man," said his wife, in milder tones. "Will you stick to it?"

"You bet I will. I'm goin' to show them Home Guards that they didn't make nothin' by treatin' me like I was a yaller dog. I despise the way they poked my mu-el till he come mighty nigh flingin' me, an' I——"

"I ain't a carin' about that," interrupted Mrs. Ryder. "If he'd flung you long ago, an' knocked a leetle sense into your head, it would have been a good thing fur you. Do you know what Miss Ramsay done while you and them wagabones was a gettin' ready to raid her house? Wal, she sent over a big basket of the best kind of grub for we uns, an'—now you needn't go to smackin' your lips that way, 'cause you ain't had none of it yet; an' I did say to myself that you shouldn't never taste a bit of it, if you went near Miss Ramsay's house. But if you have come to your senses, an' will stick to what you say about befriendin' Luke an' the rest as often as you see a chance, I'll give you the best kind of a supper."

"I'll stick to it, Sally Ann," replied Ryder, earnestly, "'cause—why, I've got to. I look to see us all livin' in bresh shanties in less'n a week."

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Mrs. Ryder, sharply.

"I mean that Kazier Bowles'll begin burnin' the houses of all the Union people in the settlement about tomorrow or next day," replied the deposed chieftain. "I've allers kicked agin' them kind of doin's, 'cause I knowed it would bring Luke an' his friends outen the swamp; an' if they do come out, they'll make bonfires of the houses of all us Confed'rits. I'm powerful sorry that we uns smashed

up them pianners an' things, 'cause now how'll I go to work to make Luke believe that I'm a friend of his'n? If I show myself to him, I am liable to be filled so full of buckshot holes that I'll do fur a winder."

"An' if Kazier Bowles an' the rest of them wuthless Home Guards finds out that you are bein' friendly with Luke, they'll call you to the door some night an' pop you over," said his wife, in a tone of anxiety.

"Perzackly," assented Amos with a groan. "Now you see jest how I'm fixed, don't you? What in the world am I to do, Sally Ann? 'Pears to me like I'm in a scrape all along of them fellers kickin' me outen the company."

It looked that way to Mrs. Ryder, too; and as she could not say anything encouraging to her dejected husband, she turned about and went into the house. Ryder took the saddle and bridle off his mule, leaving the animal to go where he pleased, and sat on the steps to think over the situation.

Ryder did not enjoy his supper as he thought he would. The good things that had been provided for him by the generosity of the woman whose house had been wrecked by his orders seemed to choke him; and although he was hungry, he made a very unsatisfactory meal. He managed to swallow a few mouthfuls of bread and meat, and then he pushed his chair away from the table, and picked up his pipe.

But the tobacco did not soothe his nerves, or drive away his fears. He went to bed trembling with apprehension; and when he slept, he dreamed that he saw Luke Bennett and his friends approaching the cabin to take summary vengeance upon him. He got up the next morning as tired as he was when he went to bed, and the first words he said were:

"Now, Sally Ann, you open the door an' see if thar's anybody watchin' outside. They won't shoot you, because you ain't done nothing; but they would let into me afore you could say 'Gen'ral Jackson' with your mouth open."

Mrs. Ryder was a woman of courage as well as muscle, but it was not without some misgivings that she complied with his request. She opened the door about an inch, but quickly drew back and closed it again.

"Thar's somebody out thar, as sure as you're born," said she, in a frightened whisper. "He's comin' up the road."

Ryder, who made a frantic jump for his bear killer, stopped, when he heard the concluding sentence.

"If he's coming along the road he ain't a goin' to pester we uns," said he, confidently. "I ain't afeared of nobody who keeps so't I can see him. Look again, Sally Ann."

Mrs. Ryder looked, and threw the door wide open, just as Ike Bishop hurried up to the bars. The guerrilla chief gazed at him in amazement. The boy carried his left arm in a sling, and wore a bandage over his left eye.

"Wal, I do think in my soul, Ike Bishop!" exclaimed Ryder, as soon as he could speak. "What you been a doin' to yourself?"

"I ain't been a doin' of nothing," answered Ike, as he came into the house, and took possession of the chair that was pointed out to him. "Some of them fellows that's layin' out in the swamp done this fur me. But didn't we have a fight with 'em, though? An' didn't they kill Captain Belden? They must, for he never came back to us again. An' don't I know whar the money is, an' ain't Kurnel St. Clair diggin' out of here as fast as his hoss can

carry him, all along of a note that was left on his gallery last night? Whew! I've got so much to tell you that I don't know whar to begin."

"Do you pretend to say that Kurn St. Clair has been warned to leave the kentry?" cried the captain, who had listened in surprise to this rambling speech. "Who warned him?"

"Luke Bennett, in course. The kurn came over to our house this mornin' an' told me all about it. When he got hum last night he found all his women folks skeered to death, all along of a note that one of them had found on the gallery. I guess the kurn was skeered, too, for he dug out bright an' 'arly; but, mind you, he didn't go back to Tennessee, like Luke told him he must. He drawed a bee line fur Vicksburg, an' he's goin' to ask the gen'ral to send over a company of men an' snake Luke an' the rest of them fellers outen the swamp. An' that's what I come hyar to talk to you about. If you uns want the money that you have been a lookin' fur, you mustn't waste no time. I know whar Luke's hide out is, an' if you will get your company together I will guide you to it, pervided you will hand over ten thousand dollars the minute you find the money. If you won't do it, them Vicksburg fellers can come an' get it fur all I care. If we could 'a' gobbled them last night, I'd 'a' made six thousand dollars, 'cause the kurn promised it to me; but they made a good fight of it, an' we didn't have men enough to take 'em. Now, capting, what do you say?"

"I wish in my soul that I'd knowd this yesterday," replied Ryder, looking down at the floor in a brown study. "I can't do nothing, Ike. The men kicked me outen the company, 'cause we didn't find the money in them houses. No; I don't command the Home Guards any more. Kazier Bowles is the man you want to go to. He's the capting now."

The deposed chief did not tell his visitor that he had turned against the company, and intended to befriend Luke Bennett in every way he could from that time forward, for he knew that Ike was too good a rebel to be intrusted with any such dangerous secret. He would go straight to Kaziah Bowles with it, and then something disagreeable would be sure to happen.

"Wal," said Ike, as he rose to go. "If Kazier's the man, I reckon I might as well keep a lumberin' till I find him. It will take we uns three or four days, and mebbe a week, to get ready to make the attack, 'cause the water is six feet deep all over the swamp, an' we've got to build boats enough to hold thirty or forty men. We must take force enough to surround the hide out, 'cause if we don't, some of 'em will be sure to slip away from us. You'll lend a hand, I s'pose?"

"O yes," said Ryder, who knew better than to make any other reply. "I'll be around when I'm wanted."

When Ike was safely out of hearing Captain Ryder turned to his wife.

"Now, ol' woman," said he, "you'd best toddle right down to Miss Ramsay's, an' tell her what you heared Ike say to me. Jest say to her, while you are about it, that I'm a Luke Bennett man from this time on, and that, if I can help it, them boats that Ike talks of buildin' shan't never bother him. Tell her, too, that I'll watch these fellers day an' night, an' keep her an' Miss Bennett posted in everything they are doin' or thinkin' of doin'. Make it as strong as you can, Sally Ann, 'cause I know that Luke is awful mad at me all along of what we uns done yesterday."

Mrs. Ryder thought the suggestion a good one, and she lost no time in acting upon it.

CHAPTER XX.

LETTERS OF WARNING.

The last time we saw Luke Bennett and Joe Ramsay, they were just setting out on some sort of secret mission which would keep them away from their friends nearly all night. As they paddled away from the island they purposely touched one of the wires connected with the alarm bells in the cabin, believing, as Sidney Jones said, that their guest would sleep more soundly if he could see for himself what precautions they had taken to guard their camp. Then they turned the bow of their canoe toward the nearest shore, and plied their paddles steadily until their boat grounded on the shore.

They sprang out at once, but did not stop to conceal their boat, because it was so dark that one might have passed within two feet of it without discovering it. They simply drew it half way out of the water and then shouldered their guns, and set out at a brisk pace toward the road.

When they reached it they broke into a dog trot, and at the end of an hour found themselves in front of Colonel St. Clair's house. It would be a pity to burn it, the boys told each other, for it was a noble old mansion, and there were three women living in it; but it was a greater pity that Colonel St. Clair should excite Ryder to activity, and urge him to make war upon the generous women who had often fed his wife and daughters when they were hungry.

"I certainly hope the colonel will pay some attention to what I have written to him," said Luke, taking a letter from the inside pocket of his jacket. "If he don't, up she goes!"

Joe opened the gate, and the two boys hastened up the broad walk, now overgrown with weeds and grass, mounted the steps that led to the porch and knocked at the door. The summons was answered almost immediately by the colonel's wife, who started and turned pale when she saw who her visitors were.

"Good evening, Mrs. St. Clair," said Luke, lifting his hat. "Here is a letter for the colonel. Will you be kind enough to give it to him when he returns from hunting *bear meat?*"

Luke laid a good deal of emphasis upon the last two words. He wanted the lady to understand that he knew very well that the colonel was not after bear meat, but that his object was to capture the boys who were hiding in the swamp.

"I will see that he gets it, Luke," replied Mrs. St. Clair, in a trembling voice.

"Thank you. Good evening."

The boys departed as rapidly as they had come, and hurried away to carry the same warning message to the house of Captain Griffin, which was located about two miles farther down the road.

This being done, they took to the fields again, and after another hour's walk mounted the steps leading to the porch of a third house, and, entering without ceremony, found a lady sitting on one side of a wide, old fashioned fireplace, and a very fat darky woman dozing on the other. They both sprang to their feet as the boys came in, and a second later the lady was clasped in Luke Bennett's arms. It was his mother.

"I bress de good Lawd dat I am spar'd to see dis day!" exclaimed Aunt Martha. She was the boy's

old nurse. She used to take care of him when he was a little fellow, and could not have thought more of him if he had been her own pickaninny. "Dem white trash dat's went inter de swamp to hunt bar meat didn't cotch yer, Moss' Luke."

"No, and they are not going to catch me, either, Aunt Martha. Bring us chairs; there's a good soul!"

The boys seated themselves in front of the blazing wood fire, Luke getting as close to his mother's side as he could; but they did not, for an instant, let their guns out of their hands. They held them on their knees while they talked, knowing that it behooved them to be constantly on their guard.

"Have you just come from the hide out?" asked Mrs. Bennett, when there was a lull in the conversation.

"N-no, ma'am," replied Luke, with some hesitation. "Joe and I have been attending to a little business."

"Luke," said his mother, while an expression of anxiety settled on her face, "what was that business?"

"Oh, we haven't been bushwhacking anybody," exclaimed Joe, who knew very well what Mrs. Bennett was afraid of. "We just left a couple of little notes with Colonel St. Clair's family and Captain Griffin's, telling them that they had better clear themselves and go back to the army where they belong. We all think that the unusual activity of Ryder's guerrillas is owing to their presence, and we intend to get rid of them."

While Joe was speaking, Luke had been running his eye around the room, which somehow did not look just right to him.

"Look here, mother," said he, suddenly, "where's that easy chair I brought for father when I came

home from school? Where's the piano?" he added, an instant later.

"Never mind the chair and piano," said his mother. "I am so glad to have you near me that I am quite willing to let them go. Never mind them."

"I know where they are," exclaimed the boy, while his eyes flashed and his fingers worked convulsively. "Ryder's men cut up one and smashed the other in the hope of finding father's money."

"Dat's jes' what dey done, Moss' Luke," exclaimed Aunt Martha, paying no heed to Mrs. Bennett's warning glances. "Dat's jes' what dem white trash done. Dey bus' up de pianner, an' cut up dat chair o' your'n, an' done tore up de flo'—Moss' Luke, I jes' wish you been hyar an' see how dey 'have themselves."

Luke had no reply to make, for he did not want to add to his mother's heavy burden of anxiety; but he and Joe looked at each other, and there was a volume of meaning in the glances they exchanged. Ryder's men were quite right when they told one another that they had made some determined enemies by their last raid.

"The note Tramp brought me tells me that you have a visitor at the hide out in the person of a Yankee gunboat officer," observed Mrs. Bennett, who was anxious to turn the conversation into another channel. "What sort of a gentleman does he seem to be?"

"The right sort," was Luke's reply. "We have only been acquainted with him a few hours, but we all like him. He would be a valuable acquisition if we should get into trouble, for he has smelled powder so often that he has got used to it. He must be a reliable officer, or he would not have been intrusted with dispatches. He lost his way while he was going down Rolling Fork to find General Sher-

man, and old Sam found him and brought him to the hide out."

"Well," said Mrs. Bennett, "it isn't at all probable that he will be able to return to his friends, as long as Colonel St. Clair and his party are in the swamp; and some night, when I am sure that it would be perfectly safe for you to do so, I will send you word by Tramp, and I should like to have you bring him up here. I think I should like to see a live Yankee."

"Thank you, mother; he will be glad to come. He said so. He looks just like anybody else, so far as I can see, but he wears better clothes than we do."

"How were all my folks the last time you saw them?" asked Joe Ramsay.

"Your mother was here this morning," replied Mrs. Bennett. "She was very well, but, like the rest of us, she didn't feel very good natured over Ryder's raid."

"I should say not," replied Joe, in savage tones. "I should like very much to see her, but it is a long way up there, and I am afraid daylight would catch me."

"Yes, and it will catch us here if we don't start pretty soon," said Luke, rising to his feet. "Good by, mother. It does me a world of good to have half an hour with you."

"Good by, my dear boy. That Heaven may guard and keep you is my constant prayer."

The farewell embrace was long and lingering; but at last Luke turned away with tears in his eyes, and followed Joe Ramsay out of the door.

It took the friends an hour and a half to reach the hide out. As they drew near to it, they ran against one of the submerged wires on purpose to ring the bell and warn their friends of their ap-

proach. They went into the hide out the same way they left it, and when they reached the end of the passage, they found all their companions assembled there; but where was the boisterous greeting that they were wont to extend to those of their company who left the hide out for any purpose? As soon as their canoe came within reach, Sidney Jones seized it, and drew the bow high upon the bank; but he did not speak.

"Now, then," exclaimed Luke, with some anxiety in his tones, "why don't you fellows say something? You are as dumb as so many clams."

As Luke Bennett sprang ashore, he caught sight of old Sam, who stood close behind Tom Pike; and one glance at his staring eyes, which seemed to have grown twice their usual size since he saw him last, was enough to convince Luke that there had been something exciting going on at the hide out during his absence.

"What's the matter with everybody, any way?" he demanded. "Why don't you speak? Has anything happened here since we went ashore?"

"I should say so," replied Sidney, in a tone of voice which turned Luke Bennett's anxiety into positive alarm. "There's been a good deal going on, and if it hadn't been for Duckfoot we should all have been captured by Colonel St. Clair and his gang."

"Put it there, Ned," said Luke, extending his hand to the young officer. "I told mother that if any of us got into trouble we should find a good backer in you. Now, what has happened?"

"But, bad as things are here, there have been worse things going on in Vicksburg," added Sidney.

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Joe. "And who has been here to bring you news from Vicksburg?"

"Come with me and I will show you."

Filled with apprehension, Luke and Joe followed Sidney, who led the way through the cabin and out to the camp fire. They saw a strange canoe drawn out upon the bank, with Ned Marsh's boat cloak spread over one end of it. Sidney halted beside the canoe and raised the cloak.

"A dead man!" exclaimed Luke and Joe, recoiling with horror.

"Yes," said Sidney, calmly. "He met his death while trying to get us into trouble. Worse than that, he has placed some of our friends in Vicksburg in danger of their lives."

Luke and Joe turned pale as death and tried to speak, but they could not utter a sound.

"I know what you would say," continued Sidney. "It is a long story, and Duckfoot can tell it to you better than I can, for he knows the man whom this spy was personating when Ike Bishop's chance shot sent him to his long home. Ike fired at us—at Duckfoot and me; but Ned was sharp enough to back our canoe toward the cane, and the charge of buckshot, that was intended for us, struck this spy."

"How do you know that he was a spy?" Joe managed to ask.

By way of reply Ned produced the shattered button, and took from it the tell tale piece of paper. Then he drew from his pocket the letter of introduction that had been prepared for Proctor, saying:

"If you will read this, you will get a pretty good idea of the situation. In order that you may read it understandingly, perhaps I had better tell you that the man Proctor,mentioned in it,is a noted Union spy. He was captured and taken to Vicksburg, and your friends tried to aid him to make his escape, knowing that if he didn't get away he would stand a fair chance of being hanged. They gave him instructions, together with a package of letters that

were to be delivered to you when he found the hide out; but the plot was discovered, and this man Belden took Proctor's place and came over here, probably with the intention of locating your hiding place, so that he could come back with a force big enough to take you all prisoners."

"He dug a pit for us, and fell into it himself," said Luke, gravely. "He was justly punished, but I am glad his blood is not upon our hands. He rang the bells when he came up to the hide out, I suppose?"

"Yes; and gave the signal all fair and square," said Tom Pike. "I tell you that frightened us, until Duckfoot suggested that perhaps it might have been given by one of our friends who had escaped from Vicksburg."

"Sidney and I went out to meet him," chimed in Ned Marsh; "and when he told us that his name was Proctor, I knew in a minute that he was a fraud, and a dangerous one, too. But he will never reveal the secret of your hiding place."

"No; but Ike Bishop will," replied Luke, with some anxiety in his tones. "He knows these swamps like a book, and a place that he has once visited he can find again on the darkest of nights. We will notify him tonight that, if he wants to die a natural death, he must leave this country without an hour's delay. But how about our friends in Vicksburg, Duckfoot?"

Ned Marsh hesitated. That was a question he did not like to answer. But his silence spoke volumes, and Luke's heart sank within him.

"Speak up, Ned," said he, bravely trying to swallow a big lump that seemed to be rising in his throat. "Don't be afraid, for I can bear anything. How about our people in Vicksburg? Will they be hanged or shot for aiding Proctor?

"I am afraid they will be severely punished," answered Ned, reluctantly.

When Joe Ramsay heard these ominous words, his fortitude gave way utterly, and, sitting down on the damp ground where he was standing, he covered his face with his hands and cried aloud; but Luke Bennett never shed a tear.

"Brace up, Joe," said he, reproachfully. "Be a man. Your mother did not betray so much weakness when the rebels took your father out of his house and carried him over to Vicksburg, did she? Not if I know myself. She's got altogether too much pluck."

"Did you say that there were some letters for me in that package?" he added, turning to Sidney Jones.

"Yes; they are in there on the table," said Sidney, waving his hand toward the cabin. "Poor fellows!" he added, in an undertone, as Luke and Joe disappeared through the doorway. "They are about to go through the same ordeal that we passed through a little while ago—reading letters from those they may never see again."

Ned and his companions replenished the fire, and sat by it, conversing in low tones, while Luke and Joe read their letters, and thought of their imprisoned friends and relatives in Vicksburg. In a few minutes Joe Ramsay came out and joined them. His face was very pale, but he had no more tears to shed. He had nerved himself for the worst.

"Luke is writing a letter to send home by Tramp, if he happens to come here during the day," said he.

"Is he going to tell his mother just how the thing stands?" inquired Frank Barron.

"Of course he is. Our women folks must know all about it, for it would be cruel to keep it from them. The letters addressed to our mothers will be

sent to them tonight—and, at the same time, Ike Bishop will be warned that his room is better than his company. Ike knows where our hide out is, and it would be no trouble at all for Ryder and his men to build flatboats enough to bring that company of guerrillas down here. Then what?"

"I reckon there would be a fight," Tom Pike remarked.

"I reckon there would; but what good would it do us to fight so many men?"

"They are all cowards, the last one of them," said Sidney. "It is my opinion that after one or two of them had been dropped the rest would be glad to haul off."

"Perhaps you're right; but I, for one, don't want to take any chances. If we can scare Ike Bishop out of the country, we shall have nothing to fear from the guerrillas, because they won't be able to find us."

Just then Luke Bennett came out of the cabin, and seated himself in front of the camp fire.

"I have written two letters," said he; "one to mother, and the other to Ike Bishop."

"Ike can't read his letter," observed Frank.

"That isn't my fault. If he knows when he is well off, he will lose no time in finding somebody to read it for him, for if he lingers in the settlement an hour after the time I have set for his departure—well, he'll wish he hadn't; that's all. We've got a sorrowful duty to perform today, boys," he added, "and that is to bury this spy. He got just what he deserved, although we didn't give it to him; but he was doing his duty as a brave man should, and no doubt his death will bring sorrow to more than one loving heart. This has been an exciting night for us; but let's see if we can't get a wink of sleep."

The events of the next few hours can be summed

up in a few words. Shortly after daybreak the body of the spy was taken to the main land and consigned to its lonely resting place, there to remain until the last Grand Reveille. As Tramp did not put in an appearance, Mrs. Bennett having no news to communicate to the boys in the hide out, Sidney Jones and Frank Barron set out for the settlement at dark, to deliver the letters that Captain Belden had brought over from Vicksburg, as well as those that Luke had written to his mother and Ike Bishop.

Those who were left in the hide out sought their beds of boughs to make up for the sleep they had lost the night before. About two o'clock in the morning they were awakened by voices and footsteps outside the cabin, and a moment later Sidney and Frank came in.

"Well," said Luke, raising himself on his elbow, "how did our women folks take the news?"

"Much better than we did," was Sidney's reply. "Of course it was a terrible blow to them to know that our friends in Vicksburg are in the guard house, and in danger of being tried by court martial, but they bore up under it in a way that astonished us. A woman's got more pluck than a man any day."

"Did you learn anything about Colonel St. Clair?"

"Not a word. None of our folks have heard of him since he came into the swamp, and neither have the darkies, whom we questioned. They are around here yet, so Ike could not have been very badly wounded."

We know this to be a mistake; but as the colonel and his party reached home after dark, and Ike Bishop took the most extraordinary precautions to conceal his movements when he went up in the morning to call upon Captain Ryder, they had not been seen by any of the Union people in the settlement, and, consequently, there was no one who

could give Frank and Sidney any information concerning them or their movements. The colonel and Captain Griffin lost no time in obeying Luke Bennett's order to leave the country, but instead of going back to the army in Tennessee, they went somewhere else, as we shall presently see. They had not yet done with Luke Bennett and the Yankee dispatch bearer whom he had taken under his protection.

"So they are in the swamp yet!" exclaimed Luke. "Then Ike Bishop is still able to do duty, in spite of the buckshot that Sid sent into him. That knocks you, Duckfoot. You are blockaded fast enough; but you may comfort yourself with the reflection that they can't keep you here forever. When their leaves of absence expire, they will have to go back where they belong."

"Great Scott! Have I got to wait as long as that?" cried Ned, who chafed and fretted constantly under his enforced inactivity. "Couldn't I slip by them in the dark?"

"You might, but how much better off would you be, since there is no one in this party who could show you the way to Rolling Fork after nightfall?"

Ned Marsh was greatly disappointed. He hoped that his chum, Bob Andrews, had succeeded in reaching the general's flag ship, in which case the dispatches he had in his possession would be rendered useless; but that would not in any way relieve him of his responsibility. He had been ordered to find General Sherman before he returned to the Decatur, and he intended to obey that order if he lived.

CHAPTER XXI.

A DARING PROJECT.

The boys slept late that morning, and it was nine o'clock when Joe Ramsay sat up on his bed of boughs, and, after listening a moment, aroused his companions by calling out:

"Wake up, you sleepy heads! Here's news for us. I can hear Tramp coming. Sam!"

"Yes, sah," replied the old negro, who was in the act of pushing one of the canoes into the water. "I gwine start right now, sah. Bes' git up in dar. De bacon done cooked."

It is not probable that the boys would have been in any great hurry to answer the call to breakfast, but the announcement that Tramp was approaching their hide out brought them to their feet in short order. By the time they reached the camp fire, over which Sam had been preparing the bacon and slap jacks, the old fellow had disappeared in the cane. When he came back, at the end of half an hour, Tramp at once sprang ashore, and seemed anxious to show his master the letter that was tied to his collar. Luke unfastened the string, took off the piece of oiled silk that was wrapped around it, read a line or two at the beginning of the letter, and then stopped and shook his fist in the air.

"Of all the impudent scoundrels I ever heard of, that Amos Ryder is the beat," said he, with sup-

pressed fury. "After wrecking my mother's house, he has the assurance to go there again. Just listen to this:

MY DEAR LUKE,—I had a visitor shortly before daylight this morning, and who do you think it was? It was none other than Captain Ryder, who has been deposed by his men, on account of his failure to find that money. How they could blame him for it I am sure I can't imagine. He came to assure me that from this time forward he will be your steadfast friend, and that he will keep me posted regarding the movements of the guerrillas. To prove he was in earnest, he told me that Kaziah Bowles, the man who has been selected by the company to fill his place, has detailed twenty men who are to set out at daylight in canoes, and patrol the Rolling Fork as far down as Yazoo River; so you see that it will be quite impossible for that gunboat officer to deliver his dispatches at present. The rest of the company are to leave their homes and camp in the swamp, about two miles from the settlement, and devote their energies to building flatboats. As soon as a sufficient number have been completed, the entire company will set out, with Ike Bishop for a guide, to make an assault upon your hide out.

This news is bad enough, and it troubles me greatly; but it is not the worst that Captain Ryder told me. Colonel St. Clair and Captain Griffin left their homes at an early hour yesterday morning, in obedience to the orders you and Joe left with their families, but they did not return to Tennessee. They went over to Vicksburg——

"That's the worst piece of news I have heard regarding Colonel St. Clair," exclaimed Sidney Jones. "We're going to see trouble now, as sure as you're a foot high."

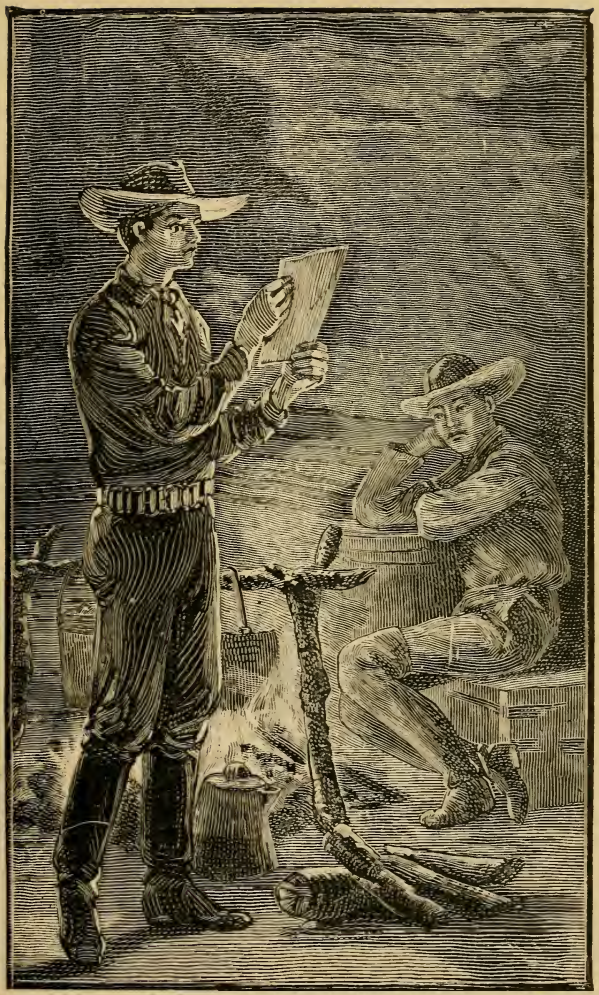
"Our hide out is just as good as broken up. Mark what I tell you," chimed in Joe Ramsay.

Luke said nothing, but there was a troubled look on his face as he went on with his reading.

—over to Vicksburg, intending to bring back men enough to take you prisoners; so you see, my dear boy, that your troubles are only just beginning.

Now, Luke, do be careful. Remember that constant watchfulness is the price of your liberty, and do not, for one moment, relax your vigilance. Affectionately, MOTHER.

"What do you think of that?" inquired Luke, as he folded up the letter and put it into his pocket. "You fellows talk it over among yourselves while I



LUKE BENNETT READING HIS MOTHER'S LETTER.

write a line to mother, telling her that we always sleep with one eye and both ears open, and that it is simply impossible for an enemy to surprise us."

"Will that party from Vicksburg assault us during the daytime, or will they wait until after dark?" asked Frank Barron, as Luke turned on his heel and hastened toward the cabin.

"If Colonel St. Clair left for Vicksburg early yesterday morning, and met with no delay in securing aid, he ought to be here within a few hours," observed Tom Pike. "He'll pitch into us the minute he comes within shooting distance of the hide out, be it day or night."

"That's what I think," said Joe. "What would you advise us to do, Duckfoot?"

"Well, then, my advice is that you pack all your valuables into your canoes, leave the hide out and go farther back into the swamp," said Ned. "You can't successfully resist either of the forces by which you are threatened, and the only thing you can do is to run."

"That's my idea," exclaimed Luke Bennett, looking up from his writing. "I'll add a postscript to this note telling mother not to send Tramp down here any more at present, for we shall not be here to receive him. It ought to be perfectly safe for us to go to the settlement for our information, seeing that the guerrillas are all going to camp in the swamp while they are building those flatboats."

"Look here," said Ned Marsh, a bright idea suddenly occurring to him. "The officers and men of our navy have often performed a very brilliant exploit, which is called 'cutting out.'"

"I know what that is," interrupted Joe. "It is capturing a vessel in an enemy's harbor."

"Exactly. Now, if Ryder can be induced to tell Mrs. Bennett when those flatboats are completed,

what's the reason we can't slip up there some dark night and cut them out?"

"What shall we do with them after we get them?" asked Joe. "We can't tow them away through this thick swamp on a dark night. We shall be running into trees all the time."

"We can tow them a hundred yards, or so, if we are quiet about it, and then destroy them, can't we?" demanded Ned.

"But the guerrillas are camped right there, and won't the sound of our axes draw their fire?" inquired Tom.

"Great Scott! We don't want to break the boats up with axes," exclaimed the young officer. "Haven't you fellows any augers on your plantations?"

"Why, of course we have," said Frank, with a laugh. "I didn't think of that."

"Duckfoot," said Luke, coming out of the cabin with his letter in his hand, "you're a brick. I tell you we're not beaten yet."

Luke tied the letter to Tramp's collar, and the old negro made ready to take him ashore. Sam showed a good deal of the whites of his eyes while he was putting his canoe into the water, for the conversation to which he had just listened had frightened him nearly out of his senses.

"Mind what you are about," cautioned Sidney Jones. "Colonel St. Clair has had plenty of time to return with a company of graybacks, and they may be loafing around out there now, for all we know. Don't let them get sight of you, for if you do, they will make a mule whacker of you, sure."

Old Sam pushed off without making any reply, and Luke and his companions, believing that they were in danger as long as they remained in the hide out, at once began making preparations to leave it, and seek safety deeper in the swamp.

They worked to such good purpose that by the time Sam returned they were ready for the start. They had nothing to take with them except their clothing, provisions, ammunition and weapons. Not a word was said about money, and this led Ned Marsh to believe that the treasure that Colonel St. Clair wanted to find was not concealed in or about the hide out. In fact Luke Bennett said so, as he deposited the last basketful of potatoes in his canoe.

"I suppose that when the colonel and Ike Bishop find our island they will think themselves rich men," he remarked with a smile. "There's where they are going to get fooled. See anything suspicious out there?" he inquired, as the old darky pushed the bow of his canoe upon the bank.

"No, sah," replied Sam, whose look and tone of voice seemed to indicate that he regarded his escape from capture as something that was little short of a miracle. "Nobody out dar yet, Moss' Luke."

Each member of the party had a canoe to himself, and they shoved off in the order in which their boats lay upon the bank, Luke Bennett leading the way, and old Sam bringing up the rear.

As they moved out of the cane into the open swamp, they closely scrutinized every tree and thicket within the range of their vision, but could not see anything to excite their alarm. The swamp appeared to be deserted by all save themselves; but Mrs. Bennett's letter had warned them that such was not the case. A score of ruffians had been paddling up and down Rolling Fork ever since sunrise that morning, and now they had been joined by as many more, and the whole force, commanded by a rebel staff officer, and guided by Colonel St. Clair and Captain Griffin, was moving rapidly upon the hide out.

Forty men against six boys! It was no wonder that Colonel St. Clair felt sure of success, or that he and Captain Griffin told each other that they would be rich men before they went into camp.

As soon as Luke was clear of the cane, he turned his canoe to a right oblique, and followed nearly the same course that he and Joe Ramsay pursued when they went ashore to deliver those letters of warning. The thickest part of the swamp lay in that direction.

When they had gone about half a mile they came to a dense canebrake. When they entered it, they would be out of sight of the hide out, and so securely hidden that a regiment of men might have searched for them in vain. Here Luke Bennett stopped paddling, and brought his canoe to a standstill.

"I should really like to know whether or not we have been frightened without cause," said he, as the other canoes crowded up around his own, "and if you fellows will go on to the old bee tree, and make a camp there, I'll stay here and watch for a little while. Sid, be good enough to hand out a piece of bread, and a slice of that cold bacon. I may get hungry before I see you again."

After a little search among the provisions, Sidney found and passed over a substantial lunch, and then led the way into the cane.

As soon as his friends disappeared, Luke Bennett pushed his canoe into the cane just far enough to conceal it from the observation of any one who might happen to pass through the open swamp. Then stretching himself out flat in the bow, he waited to see what was going to happen.

CHAPTER XXII.

A BARREN VICTORY.

For an hour or more Luke Bennett lay almost motionless on the bottom of his canoe, his chin resting on his arms, and his eyes peering through the cane toward the deserted hide out. Then he was aroused from a reverie into which he had fallen by a slight splashing in the water off to the right.

He turned his gaze in the direction from which the sound came, but the cane was so thick that he could not see two feet beyond the side of his canoe.

A moment later, however, two large skiffs, both loaded to the water's edge with rebel soldiers, came out from among the trees, and passed slowly across the open swamp in front of his hiding place. They were so close to him that he could have distinguished the color of their eyes, if they had turned their faces toward him ; but they all kept their gaze fastened upon the thicket of bushes and cane that concealed the hide out.

"I am almost ready to forgive Ryder for smashing my mother's piano," soliloquized Luke, as he watched the movements of the soldiers. "Hallo! There's another party of them," he added, as he looked past the skiffs in his immediate front, and saw two more boat loads of soldiers deeper in the swamp. They were taking their positions on the other side of the hide out, which was now completely surrounded.

"I am very glad that Amos Ryder's men got mad at him, and kicked him out of the company," said Luke to himself. "If he hadn't told mother what Colonel St. Clair had made up his mind to do, we should have been captured as sure as the world. Now, doesn't St. Clair deserve some punishment for this? I have half a mind to touch a match to his house this very night."

The skiffs on the opposite side of the hide out disappeared from Luke's view while he was talking to himself in this way, and the two that were nearest him separated and approached the island from different directions.

No sooner had they taken up their positions than a chorus of hideous yells rang through the swamp —real rebel yells, such as the boys in blue have often heard when the enemy was charging upon their lines. The yells must have been intended for a signal to the men on Luke's side of the hide out, for they yelled lustily in return, and, dropping their oars into the water, sent their skiffs rapidly toward the island.

Luke waited to see no more. It would not take the rebels many minutes to discover that the boys they had been so certain of capturing had slipped through their fingers very neatly, and then they would probably begin a vigorous pursuit, spreading themselves through the swamp, and looking everywhere for a trail.

"But they will have their trouble for their pains," thought Luke, as he sat up in his canoe, and pulled himself along by grasping the cane on each side. "As fast as I pass along the cane closes up behind me, and consequently I don't leave any trail."

Congratulating himself on his narrow escape from capture, Luke worked industriously to force his way through the canebrake, pausing now and then

to listen. But if there was any pursuit made he did not know it.

The disappointed and angry commander of the attacking party knew that it would be worse than useless to attempt to follow fugitives who were as well acquainted with the swamp as Luke Bennett and his companions were; and so, after consultation with Colonel St. Clair and Captain Griffin, he decided to camp in the hide out, and try another plan. He did not mean to go back to Vicksburg without those boys if he could help it. What that plan was I will tell you presently.

It took Luke four long hours to work his way through the canebrake; and although he had nothing but the sun to guide him, and that luminary changed his position in the heavens a good many degrees during those four hours, the young refugee did not miss the old bee tree by so much as one hundred yards.

His companions were awaiting his arrival with no little impatience. They had erected a commodious lean to at the foot of the tree; a fire was burning in front of it, and there was an odor of bacon and coffee on the air that made Luke hungry.

"We got away just in time, didn't we?" said Tom Pike, as he seized the bow of Luke's canoe and drew it upon the bank. "We know they've come, because we heard them yelling."

"Yes, sir, they've come," replied Luke. "I don't know how many of them there were, but I saw four boat loads. Some of them passed so close to my hiding place that I dared not move a hand, for fear of attracting their attention. They were very quiet until they got the hide out surrounded, and then they raised their charging yell and dashed in. I would give something if I could have seen St. Clair's face when he found that his birds had flown."

"So would I," said Sidney. "That empty hide out must have told him that we knew as much about his contemplated movement as he did himself."

As there were no alarm bells in their new camp to warn them of the approach of an enemy, the boys thought it best to stand guard that night. Ned Marsh volunteered to stand from eight o'clock until twelve; and as Luke did not feel at all sleepy, he offered to sit up with him.

The night passed without an alarm of any kind. Indeed the boys were in no danger of attack, Colonel St. Clair and his party of rebels being more than ten miles distant.

"I should really like to know where those fellows are and what they are doing," said Sidney, after he had disposed of his share of the bacon and slapjacks that were served up for breakfast. "Tom, suppose you and I take one of the canoes and do a little scouting."

"All right. Let's go around the canebrake. It is hard work to force a canoe through it."

"I wouldn't do that, boys," said Luke, hastily. "I don't believe that those soldiers have gone back to Vicksburg. They are looking for us, you may depend upon that; and if they should see you before you see them, they would either capture or shoot you. My advice to you is to keep clear of the open swamp, and stick to the cane. Whatever you do, don't go near the hide out. No matter whether you see anybody around there or not, don't go near it. It will be time enough for us to go back when Ryder tells mother that those soldiers have returned to the city."

"And when we go back, we shall find a bed of ashes, and nothing else," observed Joe. "Of course they will burn us out."

It was hard work to pull a canoe through that

thick canebrake; but Sidney and Tom saw the force of Luke's reasoning, and thought it best to follow his advice. They set out at once, and the day was well spent before their companions saw them again.

"You're always right, Luke Bennett," were the first words that fell from Sidney's lips. "Those rebs are camped in our hide out. We saw some of them rowing around as if they were taking a look at things; and while we sat in the cane watching them, we discovered a boat load of them coming around the east end of the canebrake."

"Aha!" exclaimed Luke. "They were out scouting, too; and if you had gone around the cane, as you thought of doing, you might have run right into them before you knew it."

"That's the idea," said Tom. "Now, what are they hanging around out there for? Do they expect us to go back to the hide out and be captured?"

"I don't know; but I am going home tonight to ask mother if she knows," answered Luke. "The rebels are here in the swamp, the guerrillas are camped two miles from the settlement, building flatboats, and I think it will be perfectly safe for me to give mother a call. Will you go with me, Duckfoot? She said she would be glad to see you."

"I will," replied Ned, readily.

He went; and in the next chapter I will tell you of the adventure that befell him before he saw the old bee tree again.

CHAPTER XXIII.

RYDER PROVES HIS FRIENDSHIP.

"Things in and about our house do not look much as they did before the war. Every carpet mother had was long ago cut up into blankets, and sent to the conscripts in Vicksburg, together with everything in the shape of bed clothing that she could spare; our stock has been killed off; the horses and mules confiscated by the rebels; and I am expecting to hear every day that those guerrillas have killed the few cows that we have hidden in the cane."

So spoke Luke Bennett, as he and Ned Marsh trudged across the old cotton field toward the home of the young refugee. Some might have said that they were foolhardy in thus exposing themselves to capture at the hands of Kaziah Bowles and his men, for it was a clear, starlight night. But they took their chances on that, and, besides, they carried nine shots in their weapons, and were prepared to make a stubborn fight.

"If you had happened down here before the North and South got to pulling hair, I could have mounted you on as fine a filly as you ever saw," continued Luke, and his companion was sure that he could detect a tremor in his tones. "She was of the old Denmark stock, came from Kentucky, and cost the snug sum of two thousand dollars, being what is called a "gaited" nag. The horse that

used to take my older brother on his gallops about the country cost twice as much."

"Where are they now?" inquired Ned.

"Dead, I hope, for I should be sorry to think that those two cavalry officers who stole them had been enjoying rides on them all this while. The one who took my brother's horse rode him up in front of the porch, with the remark: 'Well, Gus Bennett, if you won't do duty for the Confederacy, you may bet your last dollar that your horse will;' and Gus was so mad that it was all mother could do to keep him from shooting. I wish you could know Gus. He's a splendid fellow, if he is my brother. But he is tied up hard and fast in Vicksburg, and if he isn't shot or hanged for helping Proctor, or killed in battle, he will be captured when Grant takes the city."

"That's the best thing that could happen to him," replied Ned, "and you ought to pray for it every hour in the day."

"But suppose 'unconditional surrender' should ship the whole business off to Camp Douglas, or Johnson's Island? We would stand no chance at all of seeing our friends."

"But he won't do it. Your father and brother will have to be paroled, because the rebs haven't prisoners enough to give in exchange. I happen to know that there is a Confederate commissioner in Vicksburg, who is authorized to attend to all such business. What I am afraid of is, that Pemberton will hurry his men into camp in order to keep them together until they are exchanged. If he lets them go home, he will never see the most of them again."

"You're right there," said Luke, earnestly. "To quote from old Sam: 'One time fool is no fool; but two three times fool is big fool.' If our friends

once succeed in getting out from under the eye of their officers they will never shoulder a musket again. Now, here we are," continued Luke, halting for a moment at the foot of the steps to whisper a word of caution to the young officer. "If mother should learn that Colonel St. Clair has made an attack upon our hide out with a party of soldiers at his back, it would trouble her exceedingly; so be careful and not give her a hint of it. The Johnnies will go back when they find that they can't make anything by loafing about in the swamp, and then we will tell her all about it. Come on."

So saying, Luke mounted the steps, and ushered his companion into the presence of his mother and the faithful old "mammy." The latter, true to the instincts of her race, at once sprang to her feet, and began calling down Heaven's choicest blessings upon the head of "her boy," while the mother wound her arms about the neck of her stalwart son, laid her head upon his broad shoulder, and cried silently. Ned Marsh turned away to hide his own tears, and told himself that there was something incongruous in the picture that was presented to his gaze—the uncarpeted floor, the bare walls, from which the paper had been torn in strips by Ryder's frantic men, the rough deal table, the stiff backed kitchen chairs, and the handsome, stately lady in her rich silk dress. But it was cheaper for her to wear old silk dresses than to buy new calico ones; and, besides, where was the calico to come from as long as Vicksburg remained in the hands of the Confederates? Suddenly the sorrowing mother and son seemed to remember that they were not alone.

"Pardon me, Mr. Marsh," said Mrs. Bennett, releasing herself from Luke's encircling arm, and extending both hands toward the young gunboatman, "but my burden is very hard to bear, and sometimes

I sink under it. Do you think that the rebels will be so very severe with our people in Vicksburg? You don't, do you?"

"I assure you, Mrs. Bennett, that I sympathize with you deeply," replied Ned, while his voice trembled, and a big lump rose in his throat. "The longer I stay here, the more clearly do I see the full significance of what Luke once said to me: 'It costs something to be loyal down here.' I really wish I could say a comforting word to you, but I can't. I never heard of such a case before, but your friends will certainly have to stand a court martial for helping our spy."

"It's a hanging or shooting offense, and that's just all there is about it," Luke blurted out. "Mother, you will never see father or Gus again, and you might as well make up your mind to it first as last."

"But I shall see you every few days."

"Yes; but they——"

Luke was about to say that Colonel St. Clair and his company of men from Vicksburg had tried hard enough to catch him, but he checked himself in time, and began looking about the room; though Heaven knows there was little enough to be seen there. Then, noticing that his mother's eyes were fastened inquiringly upon him, he said, little dreaming how soon his words would be verified:

"But they may some day find out where we live, and give us a lively race for life and liberty. Sit down, Duckfoot. What about those flatboats that Bowles is building? Have you heard any more concerning them?"

Mrs. Bennett replied that she had not. She knew that the company had been marched into the swamp, that the guerrillas had stolen all the lumber in the settlement that they could get hold of, and that was

the extent of her information; but it was sufficient to make her very uneasy. What would Luke and his friends do when attacked by so large a force of men as Captain Bowles could bring against them?

"We are not going to be attacked by them, or by anybody else," said Luke, confidently. "Make your mind easy on that score. Open communication with Amos as soon as you can—I don't suppose that he will have the face to show himself to you after what he has done—and tell him to keep a close watch over those boats, and send you word the minute they are completed and ready for sailing. Give Ryder to understand very distinctly that we put no faith whatever in his words; he must *do* something if he wants to have us believe that he is sincere. When the boats are done, send us information by Tramp, and—and——"

"And what?" said his mother, inquiringly. "Luke, what reckless thing are you going to do now?"

"Nothing reckless at all, I assure you. We'll play a Yankee trick on Mr. Bowles and his valiant followers. Now, mother, don't you worry. We are well aware that Ike Bishop knows where our hide out is, and if he ever succeeds in piloting that gang of ruffians down there, he will have his trouble for his pains, for we won't be there. That's a pretty big swamp, and it would be an easy matter for us to slip out and hunt up another hiding place."

"Not if they surprise you," said Mrs. Bennett.

"But they can't surprise us. That's one of the mysteries connected with our hide out, and some day, when I have plenty of time, I will tell you all about it. Great Scott! What's that?"

Just then hasty footsteps sounded on the porch, a hand was laid upon the latch, the door sprung quickly but noiselessly open, and a pale, scared face,

the face of Amos Ryder, the ex captain of the guerrilla band, was thrust into the room. In an instant it was covered by the boy's double barrel.

"You scoundrel!" hissed Luke, between his clinched teeth. "Have you the cheek to show yourself among white folks? It's well for you that Joe Ramsay isn't here, for he has sworn to shoot you on sight."

"I looked fur it," said the man, in a scarcely audible whisper, "an' I reckon if anybody's got a call to be shot, it's me; but, Mr. Luke, I come here this time as a friend—'deed I do. Git outen here, quick. If you stay in this house a second longer, you will be gobbled up an' tooken over to Vicksburg, sure. I jes' seen a hul passel of men comin' up the road from t'wards the swamp, an' Kurn St. Clair is with 'em, 'cause I done heared his voice. Get outen here, quick!"

Luke Bennett started as if he had been shot, and, throwing his arm about his mother's waist, snatched one hasty parting kiss from her lips.

"What is it, Luke?" she exclaimed. "What new trouble has come upon us?"

"Nothing much, mother," answered the boy, speaking so rapidly that the words seemed to come out all at once, "only Colonel St. Clair and the men he brought over from Vicksburg have grown tired of the swamp, and are now coming up here to see what they can find."

"Then take your last look at your old home, for you will never see it again," said Mrs. Bennett, trying to be brave, while tears filled her eyes.

"Don't be too sure of that," answered Luke, encouragingly. "Burning houses is a game two can play at. The colonel has a family, and if he means that roof to stay over their heads he will let you alone. How many of them are there, Ryder?"

"A'most a hull comp'ny of 'em, I reckon," was the reply, given in an agitated tone. "*Be* you uns ever goin' to git outen here? I dassent wait no longer, fur if they ketch me here a tellin' of you, they'll pop me over sure."

"I know that, and you had better take care of yourself. I say, Ryder, this makes amends for everything except smashing my mother's piano, You'll have to do something else before I will forgive you for that. Good by, mother. Come on, Duckfoot."

The front and back doors closed simultaneously; and Amos Ryder, moving with long, noiseless strides, stole off in one direction, while the boys hastened away in another. Before Luke and his companion had gone a score of yards they saw how narrow had been their escape from being captured in the house. A delay of five minutes would have been fatal to them. The murmur of voices which had attracted Ryder's attention was hushed now; but Luke's eyes told him that the rebels had divided their force, and while one portion of it continued its march up the road, the other was making a detour with the intention of surrounding the house.

"Crouch low so as to bring your head below the horizon," whispered Luke. "We can't go directly back to our canoe, because they have cut us off from it already; so we will have to strike into the woods behind the quarter, and circle round to it. Quick and still is the word now."

As Luke said this, he bent himself half double, and in this constrained position sped along with an easy celerity of movement that Ned Marsh tried in vain to imitate. Luke was an expert at deer stalking, and Ned wasn't; but there were hunters among the approaching rebels who were quite as sharp as the young refugee was, and their eyes having become

accustomed to the darkness, they were quick to discover the crouching figures. While the negro quarter, toward which they were hastening, was still far away, the fugitives distinctly heard a voice say in low and guarded tones :

"I see something scootin' along out thar, an' I reckon I'll jes' take a whack at it."

"I wouldn't shoot," cautioned another, "for if you do, you will alarm all the folks in the house. No doubt it is one of the niggers' dogs."

Then came a short interval of silence, during which the boys did some of the best walking they had ever done in their lives, and it was one of terrible suspense. When the voice spoke again, they saw that concealment was no longer possible.

CHAPTER XXIV.

HIDING IN THE CANE.

"No, it ain't a dog, nuther," said the voice. "It's something else." Then the man to whom the voice belonged threw himself prone upon the ground, to bring the rapidly moving figures between himself and the lighter background of the sky. He held this position scarcely a moment, and jumped to his feet with an exclamation of astonishment.

"It's men," he shouted. "Dog gone my buttons! It's men. Halt thar! Whoever you be, halt!"

"Now for it, Duckfoot," said Luke, in a thrilling whisper. "I hope you are good at running, for nothing but leg bail will save us. Keep close behind me, and I will lead you to a place where a regiment of men couldn't find us."

So saying, Luke straightened up and took to his heels, holding his heavy double barrel at a trail. He did not run straight ahead, but sprang from side to side, and ducked and straightened up again, thus rendering himself a very uncertain mark to shoot at in the dim light. The command to halt was shouted at them by half a dozen hoarse voices; but it had about the same effect upon the frightened boys that the crack of a whip has upon a spirited horse. It increased their speed, and the rebels, seeing that the prizes which they had come so near capturing were likely to slip through their fingers, opened fire upon them.

It is probable, however, that the erratic movements of the fugitives saved their lives, for they succeeded in reaching the cover of the quarter unscathed, although some of the flying bullets came uncomfortably near to their heads. Had there been a double barrel or two among their pursuers, the case might have been different.

The moment the boys had placed the negro cabins between themselves and their pursuers, they settled down to business and ran as they had never run before, the hoarse yells and imprecations that arose behind them giving wings to their feet.

With these were mingled other sounds—the cries of the frightened darkies, who swarmed out of the quarter, adding their shrieks and lamentations to the oaths of the angry rebels. Among them all they raised a fearful hubbub, and while it was at its height the fugitives dashed into a canebrake and disappeared from view.

"Halt here, Duckfoot," whispered Luke, after they had with infinite difficulty worked their way about twenty yards into the cane. "They'll not follow us farther, because they know that we can shoot them as fast as they come up. Besides, they stand about as much chance of finding us as they would of finding a needle in a haystack."

At that moment the foremost of their pursuers reached the edge of the cane, and, as if to confirm Luke's words, one of them, evidently an officer, said:

"The jig's up, boys. They have reached a safe hiding place."

"You must not continue the pursuit, captain," said the voice of Colonel St. Clair. "If you should go in there you would go to your death."

"What did I tell you, Duckfoot?" said Luke, triumphantly. "They are as much afraid of us now as we were of them a few minutes ago. More than

one recruiting officer has followed a conscript into the cane and never come out again to tell whether he found him or not."

"I am not such a fool as to go in there," said a voice; and the boys were right in supposing that it belonged to the officer to whom the colonel's words of warning were addressed. "I have left more than one deserter to go his way in peace, just because he took refuge in a canebrake. Now, what is the next thing on the programme? The settlement has been aroused, and if there were any more of these swamp foxes home on a visit, they have had plenty of time in which to make their escape. And you say you don't want me to destroy the houses of the Union people?"

"By no means," answered the colonel, hastily; "and neither must you permit your men to offer the slightest indignity to Mrs. Bennett and the rest. If you do, Luke will come out of the swamp and burn my house."

"Then there seems to be nothing left for me but to go back to the city as empty handed as I came—no Yankee dispatch bearer, no recruits and no money. The expedition hasn't amounted to as much as I thought it would, and I am sorry I was ordered out on it."

"You haven't anything to regret compared to what I have," was the colonel's answer. "If Luke Bennett finds out that I was with this party, I shall see trouble. I am afraid of him."

There was more conversation carried on by the parties outside, but as they were moving away from the cane the boys could not hear what they said. When the murmur of their voices had died away in the distance, the fugitives moved cautiously from their place of concealment and stopped to reconnoiter.

By the light of the moon, which was now rising above the hill tops, they were enabled to see that their late pursuers had joined their companions in the road, and that the entire body was moving toward the swamp.

Having made sure that the coast was clear, Luke led the way along the edge of the canebrake, gradually "circling around" toward the place where they had left their canoe. They passed within less than a hundred yards of Colonel St. Clair's house, and Luke once more declared that the only thing that kept him from setting fire to it was the look that his mother would give him when she found it out. And then he added:

"Just as likely as not she would take the colonel's wife and daughters in and care for them. That's always the way with mother. No matter how badly the rebels and their women treat her, she has nothing but kind words and sympathy for them. She is too tender hearted to live in war times. I tell you, Duckfoot, if it hadn't been for our mothers, we fellows would have bushwhacked those guerrillas before this time."

Ned did not doubt it, and he would not have blamed them for it, either.

The boys found their canoe after two hours' rapid walking, during which they neither saw nor heard anything of the men whom Colonel St. Clair had brought over from Vicksburg on purpose to capture them and their treasure. Shortly after sunrise they were vociferously greeted by the comrades whom they had left in camp at the old bee tree.

"Joe has been awfully worried about you two," said Tom Pike, as he drew the bow of their canoe upon the bank. "He declares that he heard firing in the direction of the settlement. Did he? Or did he dream it?"

"I think he must have heard it," replied Luke. "At any rate, we have been shot at by ten or a dozen fellows since we left here last night."

"There, now!" exclaimed Tom, while the others could only look their surprise.

"It was Colonel St. Clair and his men," continued Luke, without waiting to be questioned. "Having failed to capture us in our hide out, they thought they would slip up to the settlement and gobble any of us who might happen to be home on a visit. They came pretty near taking us in. And who do you suppose warned us of our danger? Our old enemy Captain Ryder; and he couldn't have been more frightened if he had stood in our shoes."

The boys were really amazed now, and Frank Barron declared that he began to believe that the guerrilla was in earnest when he promised to befriend Luke at every opportunity.

"Perhaps he was; but he didn't make that promise out of any liking for me," said the latter. "He wants revenge upon the men he once commanded, and this is the way he takes to get it."

"But I don't see how he is going to carry water on both shoulders," observed Tom Pike. "He will spill some sure. If Bowles and his men find out that he is playing them false, his life will not be worth a moment's purchase."

"That's his lookout," said Joe savagely.

Luke and his companion reached camp just in time for breakfast, and while they were disposing of their corn bread and bacon, they entertained their friends with a thrilling account of their adventure.

"The conversation we overheard while we were hiding in the cane leads me to believe that the rebels have gone back to Vicksburg," said Luke, at length. "If they have, we can return to our hide out tomorrow."

"Of course we shall find a pile of ashes, and of course, too, those signal bells of mine will never do duty for us again," Sidney Jones remarked.

"What better camp do you want than this?" said Ned, looking around. "It is well supplied with wood and good water, and it is higher and drier than the hide out. Why don't you stay here?"

"There is one very good reason for it," replied Joe. "Our friends in Vicksburg know where our hide out is, but they don't know where this camp is. If by any hocus pocus one of them should succeed in making his escape from the city and reaching the swamp, we want to be on hand to help him; don't you see?"

"I didn't think of that. You may think it strange that I should say so, but I was glad to learn that so large a body of men could come over from Vicksburg during the day time, for it proves to my satisfaction that our gunboats have left the river," said Ned. "A small body might have slipped over unobserved, but a whole company could hardly have done it. The safe retreat of our boats is going to make it all the harder for me to deliver this," he continued, exhibiting the weighted envelope, which he could not have guarded more carefully if it had been filled with thousand dollar greenbacks.

"Why, if your boats are safe, that dispatch can't be of any value to General Sherman," said Luke.

"I don't know whether it is or not," answered the young officer. "My orders are to deliver it."

CHAPTER XXV.

DULL TIMES IN CAMP.

On the day following the occurrence of the exciting events which I have attempted to describe in the previous chapter, Luke Bennett and his little band took possession of their island; and a most desolate looking place they found it to be. Their cozy little cabin wasn't there, and the flames which had destroyed it had scorched and blackened the trees and bushes on every side.

More than that, the surface of the island had been dug full of holes, and a large hollow poplar, which had been thrown down by the wind, and whose branches had furnished the young refugees with fuel for their camp fire, had been split open along its entire length. The boys gazed ruefully at the charred remains of their house, and laughed when they thought how disappointed and angry Colonel St. Clair must have been over his failure to find their hidden treasure.

"If our money had been concealed on the island they would have unearthed it as sure as the world," observed Sidney Jones. "For they have dug a hole in every spot where the bushes were wide enough apart to permit them to use a spade. I hope the colonel is satisfied that he will have to give it up as a hard job."

Without wasting a moment in vain regrets, the boys pulled off their coats and went to work to clear

away the ruins of the cabin, and erect another shelter; but when it was completed it did not look much like the neat hide out that had been burned by Colonel St. Clair's orders.

The events of the last few days had showed them that the island was no longer a safe hiding place for them. A good many of their enemies knew exactly where to find it, and there was no telling when they might be forced to abandon it and flee for their lives. They did not think it worth while to put up a nice little house for the rebels to destroy, so they built a commodious lean to, with a tight roof to shelter them in stormy weather, the wide front being left open to the fire. Of course their signal bells had disappeared, and now they had nothing to warn them of the approach of an enemy.

"That's going to make it hard on us," said Frank Barron, who was sitting in front of the lean to, picking browse for his bed. "I suppose we shall have to stand guard now, day and night."

"I don't see how we are going to get around it," answered Luke. "Those fellows from Vicksburg are liable to come back at any minute, and as soon as those boats are done, we may expect a visit from our old friend, Ike Bishop. Wasn't that Tramp?" he added, raising his finger, warningly. "Yes, sir, it was. Go out there, Sam. Mother has got news for us.'

The old negro at once shoved off in his canoe to bring the messenger to the island, and Luke and his friends lounged around, awaiting his return with no little impatience. Was the news good or bad? That was the question they always asked themselves when Tramp gave them notice of his coming, and their suspense was so great that they seldom spoke to one another while they were waiting for him.

Old Sam came back at the end of twenty minutes,

and Luke made all haste to undo the letter that was tied around the dog's neck. His companions watched him furtively as he ran his eyes over the closely written lines, and they were greatly relieved when they saw him throw back his head and indulge in a silent but hearty laugh.

This was a peculiarity of the boys who lived in the hide out, and Ned Marsh had noticed it from the first. They were seldom boisterous. They never laughed aloud, and their conversations, especially at night, were carried on in a subdued tone of voice. The atmosphere of danger in which they lived had taught them caution.

"It's all right, boys," said Luke. "There's nothing but good news in it. Those villains up there in the settlement are afraid of us, as they have reason to be. Listen to this."

So saying, Luke seated himself upon a convenient log and read as follows:

Words would fail me, my dear boy, if I should attempt to tell you how terribly frightened I was, as I sat here in my desolation and loneliness, and listened to the horrid din that was going on outside. I knew that they were shooting at you and Mr. Marsh, and sometimes their yells had so exultant a ring in them, that I was sure they had succeeded in killing or capturing you; and when the rebels went away, and our people came up from the quarter and told me that you had made good your escape, the revulsion of feeling was so great that I could hardly bear up under it. Were either of you wounded? Send Tramp back at once with an answer.

I wondered why the guerrillas did not sally out to assist Colonel St. Clair, and this morning I found out. When they heard the yells and the shooting, they straightway jumped to the conclusion that you and your friends had come out of the swamp to take revenge upon them for wrecking our houses, and they were terribly alarmed. They were afraid to open their doors the next morning.

They were surprised and enraged when they learned from the negroes that Colonel St. Clair had brought a party of soldiers over from Vicksburg on purpose to capture and find the money which they (the guerrillas) hope to handle themselves, and their rage was increased when Ike Bishop received a peremptory order from the colonel to start for Tennessee without an hour's delay. Ike protested that his leave had not yet ex-

pired, but the colonel threatened to report him as a deserter if he didn't start at once, and so he had to go. You see, the colonel didn't want him to guide the guerrillas to your hide out, for fear that they might stumble upon the money, and that would make you so angry that you would burn his house. After his failure to capture you, Colonel St. Clair went home, and made hurried preparations to return to the army. I think he must have left before daylight, for no one saw him go, and he certainly is not here.

I learned all this through Mrs. Ryder, who of course got her information from her husband; and she told me to warn you not to relax your vigilance. Before Ike Bishop left, he gave Captain Bowles some very explicit directions, and the fact that work still progresses on the boats, leads me to believe that Bowles thinks himself capable of acting as his own guide. So you must not neglect to guard against surprise.

The blockade of the Rolling Fork is still kept up, and Mr. Marsh will have to remain your unwilling guest until it is raised. Tell him that it would be dangerous for him to try to reach the Mississippi, because there is a large body of rebel cavalry in there, watching for a chance to annoy Grant's troops on the other side of the river.

When Luke finished reading this letter, he and his friends looked toward Ned Marsh, to see what he thought of the situation. The expression on his face told them that he was not at all pleased with it.

"I don't see how it can be helped," said Tom, soothingly. "You are in no way to blame for it, and what's the odds so long as you're happy?"

"But I am not happy," retorted Ned. "How do I know but that my vessel has been called upon for some sort of service before this time? And here I am, shut up like a rat in a trap."

"Are you spoiling for a fight?" asked Sidney.

"By no means; but if you were in the service you would understand my feelings. You can't imagine how it makes a soldier fret and fume to know that his regiment has been under fire while he wasn't there to help. A gunboatman feels the same way. I don't like to think that some other officer has commanded my division in action, while I have been fooling around here doing nothing. Great Scott!" exclaimed Ned, throwing off his cap and pulling his

hair with both hands. "I shall go crazy if I don't get out of this pretty soon. What will my captain think of me—what can he think, but that I was a blockhead to go and lose myself in this way?"

"I don't see why you take on like that," said Tom, calmly. "The admiral knew that there was a chance for the dispatch to get lost, and that's the reason he sent it in duplicate. Why don't you let that reflection console you?"

"I can't," replied Ned. "I shall never feel like myself again until I give these papers into General Sherman's hand, and report myself to the Decatur's officer of the deck."

While this conversation was going on, Luke Bennett brought out his writing materials, and sat down to tell his mother that he and Ned Marsh had escaped unscathed from the shower of bullets that Colonel St. Clair's party had sent about their ears. When the letter was finished, old Sam and Tramp were started off with it, and then the boys settled down to five weeks of the dreariest and most monotonous existence that ever fell to the lot of a party of unfortunate refugees. Luke and his friends did not mind it so much, because they were used to it; but the restless and impatient young gunboat officer often told himself that he never could have endured it if it had not been for the letters that Luke received from his mother at regular intervals. Mrs. Bennett always had something to say about the boats, and the blockade which was still kept up along Rolling Fork.

At last there came a most welcome piece of news from the settlement. Two scows, large enough to hold twenty five men each, had been completed, and now lay upon the bank of Barlow's bayou, in the rear of the old gin house; but Captain Bowles was not quite ready to advance upon the hide out.

When he made a start, he intended to stay in the swamp until he accomplished the object for which the boats had been built; and in order that there might be nothing to hasten his return, he had gone off after more bacon and meal. Some of it was to be left in the settlement, and the rest would be used to provision his expedition. Mrs. Bennett didn't think that the boats were guarded, but still it might be well for the boys to mind what they were about.

"These women are sharp, and it is next to an impossibility to keep anything from them," said Luke, as he folded up the letter. "I never so much as hinted that we had made up our minds to capture those boats, and yet mother seems to know about it. Well, Duckfoot, now is our time. Shall we try it to-night?"

"By all means," answered Ned, quickly. "I'd rather fight than live in this way any longer."

The boys did not know it, but there were better times close at hand for all of them. Already a series of events were in progress which were destined to bring about the most astonishing as well as gratifying results

CHAPTER XXVI.

GLORIOUS NEWS.

THE boys ate an early supper, and as soon as darkness came to conceal their movements, they began to prepare for action. As they were about to shove off their canoes, Ned Marsh said:

"There's one point we ought to settle before we start: What are we going to do with those flatboats after we get them?"

"Why, we intend to bore them full of holes with these augers, and sink them in the deepest part of the swamp," replied Tom, who seemed somewhat surprised at the question.

"But don't you know that they won't sink unless they have some heavy ballast aboard to take them down?" demanded Ned. "They will float full of water, unless they are built of oak planks; and I don't believe they are."

"I declare, I never thought of that!" exclaimed Luke. "What *shall* we do with them? We want to destroy them effectually, and it wouldn't be safe to break them up with axes where they lie. We'll have to tow them to the hide out and use them for firewood."

The boys, one and all, declared that it would be a "fearful job" to bring those heavy boats so far, even in the daytime, and an almost impossible task to accomplish in the dark, because the trees in the swamp grew so close together; but now that they

came to think of it, they did not see what else they could do, unless they hid the boats somewhere after boring the holes in them.

"Well, shove off," said Ned, who had long before been selected to command the expedition. "Let's get the boats first, and decide what we will do with them afterward. Now, in order to avoid all danger of separation in the darkness, let's make the canoes fast, one behind the other, Sam taking the lead. When we reach the old gin house, Frank, Tom and I will cut loose from the line and take care of one of the boats, while the rest of you look out for the other. Is there anything that we have neglected? Then keep silence fore and aft. We don't know whether those boats are guarded or not. Go ahead, Sam."

The long line of canoes moved away in the darkness, and for an hour or more the only sound that broke the stillness was the very slight splashing made by the paddles as they rose and fell in the water.

All on a sudden, Ned became aware that they were gradually drawing out of the swamp, for he could see the sky on his left hand. A few minutes later the first outlines of a building loomed up through the darkness, the canoes in front of him were brought to a standstill, and Ned became aware that Sidney Jones was fumbling with his painter. As soon as it had been cast off, Ned dipped his paddle into the water again, and, towing Tom and Frank after him, moved up alongside Luke Bennett to hold a consultation.

"There they are," said the latter, pointing with his paddle. "I can see them very distinctly. Now, as I am nearer to the bank than you are, I will take the first one in tow, and you go on and make fast to the other. I can't see any signs of a camp fire, and

that makes me think the boats are not guarded. A sentry wouldn't be very likely to stay here in the dark, would he? But still we don't want to make any noise."

Again the canoes were put in motion, and in less than five minutes the boats, with which Captain Bowles expected to do such great things, were in possession of Luke Bennett and his friends. Once more the question arose: What should they do with them? The boats had so much breadth of beam that it was useless to think of towing them through the swamp in the dark, and if they left them waterlogged, it would be an easy matter for the guerrillas to haul them out and repair them.

While they were talking about it, they became aware that there was something going on in the settlement. First they heard an indistinct murmur of voices, which, a moment later, was followed by the clatter of many hoofs and the rapid discharge of firearms. When these sounds died away for an instant, the shrieks of frightened negroes, mingled with "rebel yells," rang in their ears.

"What is it?" Luke Bennett almost gasped; and the words were repeated by all his companions. "Is it a battle, Duckfoot? It is, as sure as the world," he added, as a second volley awoke the echoes of the swamp. "Cut loose from that scow, Sid. We must not stay here when our mothers are in danger!"

"Don't do anything foolish," Ned Marsh interposed. "You'd better stay where you are."

"Do you take us for cowards because we have never smelled powder?" demanded Joe, almost fiercely.

"By no means. But there's a fight going on out there, and your presence would cause your mothers the greatest anxiety."

"Who's fighting?"

"Of course I don't know for certain; but it is my opinion that the Home Guards are getting a beautiful whipping."

"I hope so, from the bottom of my heart," exclaimed Sidney. "But who's giving it to them?"

"It may be a company of rebel cavalry; or perhaps the planters who live up the country are getting tired of being robbed, and have determined to put a stop to it. In either case you couldn't do any good out there, and you would stand a chance of being popped over by one side or the other. Better go back to the hide out and wait for Tramp. Your mother will send you a full account of the affair as soon as it is safe for her to do so."

The boys saw the force of Ned's reasoning, and decided to follow his advice; but it was hard for them to sit there in safety and listen to the sounds of the conflict that was raging so close about their homes.

The battle, if such it was, did not last more than five or ten minutes. At the end of that time the reports of firearms ceased, the yells of the contestants and the screams of the terrified darkies gradually died away, and then all was still. The silence aroused Luke, who said, hurriedly:

"Sam, the swamp is more open right here than it is farther down the bayou, isn't it? Well, then, turn into it, and stay behind the first clump of bushes you can find. If we can't stop to destroy these boats, we will put the guerrillas to some trouble to hunt them up."

The old negro was so badly frightened that he hardly knew whether he stood on his head or his feet; but after a few attempts he managed to get his paddle in motion, and after going a quarter of a mile or so into the swamp, he found a small patch of

cane. It was not a very good hiding place, but they were so anxious to reach the hide out in time to meet Tramp, when he brought Mrs. Bennett's account of the fight, that they could not stop to look for a better.

While two of the boys busied themselves in making the boats fast to the cane, so that they would not float out of their place of concealment, two others set to work with the augers, and in ten minutes from the time they halted there, the boats were filled with water to the top of their gunwales. After that, the canoes were tied together again, and old Sam led the way toward the hide out.

"This expedition hasn't accomplished as much as I thought it would, for those boats may yet be repaired and used against us," said Luke. "But if those guerrillas have been thrashed without bringing harm to our women folks, I think we ought to be satisfied with the events of the night. It is my turn to go on guard. Are you going to stay with me, Duckfoot?"

Ned replied that he was, and Luke continued:

"I wish one of you fellows would see that Sam keeps his ears open for Tramp's signal. If he brings a letter from mother, read it at once, and then come out to the guard tree and tell us what it says. Don't waste any time about it, either, for I am very anxious to know what's been going on in the settlement.

After half an hour's steady paddling they reached the "guard tree." Their signal bells having been taken away from them, the boys were obliged to guard their hide out themselves, and some of their number were always found at this particular tree. The swamp on one side of it was comparatively clear of bushes and cane, and it would have been almost impossible for a canoe to approach the sentry

from the direction of Vicksburg without being discovered. Luke and Ned cast off their painters and fell out of the line, and their companions bade them good night and kept on toward the camp.

The two sentries had been left alone scarcely more than an hour, when Tramp's impatient signal set their hearts to beating like trip hammers. They knew when old Sam put off to bring him to the hide out, and they knew when he came back. Fifteen minutes later they saw the dim outlines of Tom Pike's figure, as he came out of the cane and sent his canoe toward them with long, impatient strokes.

"O boys!' he panted, as soon as he came within speaking distance. "It's just as Duckfoot thought. The guerrillas have been cut all to pieces."

"By whom?" asked Ned and Luke in concert.

"By some rebel cavalry; I don't know to whose command they belong. You see, the guerrillas have been reported time and again by the planters, both rebel and Union, to some officer up that way" (here Tom jerked his thumb in one direction and nodded his head in another), "and when the officer got tired of listening to so many complaints, he sent out a company with orders to wipe them off the face of the earth. They ran the guerrillas fourteen miles, and came near obeying their instructions to the very letter. Ryder told his wife all about it, and she came to your mother's house with the news."

"Did the guerrillas make any kind of a fight?" asked Luke.

"I'll bet they didn't," exclaimed Ned, in a tone which seemed to say that he was surprised at Luke for asking such a question. "Those who make war upon defenseless women haven't the 'sand' to stand up before men. I say, 'Bully for that officer, whoever he is.'"

"So do I," said Luke. "I have heard that

Bowles was the chief mischief maker, and that he was the one who planned that raid upon our houses. If that is the case, I hope he met his just deserts."

"Well, I guess he did," replied Tom. "Ryder saw him fall off his horse, but he didn't see him afterward; so he must have lain where he fell. The guerrillas made a sort of running fight of it, but if they hurt any of the cavalrymen, Ryder does not know it."

"That's the best news I ever heard," said Luke, after Tom had left them and gone back to the hide out. "I don't think that Bowles's guerrillas will ever be of any more use as an organization. I only wish they had got this drubbing before they smashed my mother's piano."

Of course the two sentries had plenty to talk about after this. One thing was plain to both of them, and that was : There would be no organized effort on the part of the guerrillas to assault the hide out and capture the money that was supposed to be concealed there. All Luke and his companions had to fear was perhaps an occasional shot from some roving member of the company, who might chance to stumble upon them in the swamp. But Luke didn't think they would resort to bushwhacking, for that was a game at which two could play; and, besides, the terrible thrashing they had just received must have taken a good deal of the courage out of them—if, indeed, they had ever had any.

In discussing such points as these the time passed rapidly away, and at last Luke thought it was about time he was calling his relief. He was about to strike a match to consult his watch, when Ned laid his hand upon his arm and pointed silently before him. His companion looked, and then stretched himself flat upon the bottom of his canoe, and shoved his heavy double barrel over the bow.

"It's a canoe, as sure as I'm a foot high," he

whispered. "Now cover him, and look sharp. If he gives the signal, it means more treachery, and he's got friends not far off."

The canoeist was by this time so close to them that Ned dared not move for fear of attracting his attention ; so he kept his seat and covered the man with his revolver, resting his elbow on his knee to make sure of a good shot. He held this position scarcely a minute when he was electrified to hear Luke say, in a husky whisper:

"Be careful, Duckfoot! For Heaven's sake, be careful! That is my brother, if I ever saw him."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE RETURNED CONSCRIPT.

NED MARSH raised the muzzle of his revolver and let down the hammer.

"Yes, sir," continued Luke, in trembling tones, "that's my brother. I am sure of it, for no one ever handled a paddle with quite as much ease and grace as Gus Bennett." Then raising his voice he called out, sharply: "Stop where you are. You have come close enough."

The answer that came back was:

"O Luke, is that you?"

The latter did not stop to respond. With frantic haste he cast off his painter, which he had made fast to the guard tree to hold his canoe stationary, and caught up his paddle. A few seconds later the two canoes dashed alongside each other, and Ned Marsh, who had considerately remained in the background, saw the young men locked in a close embrace.

"O Luke," repeated the conscript, in a husky voice, "you don't know how father and I have worried about you. Have you seen Captain Belden?"

Luke, whose head was resting on his brother's shoulder, murmured something in reply, but Ned could not catch his words.

"Well," continued the conscript, "ever since he discovered our plot to help Proctor, we have been expecting to see you and all your friends brought into Vicksburg as prisoners. Bob Ramsay made a

daring attempt to escape on purpose to warn you, but he was captured and thrust into the guard house. Who is that fellow with the brass buttons?" he asked, in a lower tone.

"He's all right," Ned heard Luke say, in reply. "He's a duckfoot who got lost in the swamp. That was a lucky thing for us, for he saved me from capture. But I will tell you about it after a while. Has father—has father been——"

"Shot or hanged? No; and we can thank General Grant for it. He has kept Pemberton so busy that he didn't have time to order a court martial. I tell you, boy, there have been lively times about Vicksburg since the Yanks crossed the river on the 31st of April. I deserted at the battle of Champion's Hill, and here I am."

"Come here, Duckfoot," said Luke. "I want to make you acquainted with my brother Gus."

The introduction was gone through with in due form, and then Ned said to the returned conscript:

"I have dispatches for General Sherman. Do you think it would be safe to try to deliver them?"

"No, I don't," said Gus, emphatically. "Wait a week, and then, if I am any prophet, you can deliver them at Haines' Bluff."

"Say, Duckfoot," exclaimed Luke, "would you mind standing guard alone while I go to the hide out and call my relief? I should like to go with Gus, because I want to see what the fellows will do when they meet him."

Ned told him to go ahead, and the brothers paddled away side by side. They acted as if they did not want to get out of reach of each other.

At the end of half an hour Joe Ramsay and Tom Pike made their appearance, and the first thing they did was to apologize to Ned for keeping him waiting so long.

"We were so surprised to see Gus, and so anxious to hear all about our friends in Vicksburg, that we talked longer than we meant to," said Joe, who, as he afterward declared, was "too happy to be of any further use."

"You were right, Duckfoot, when you said that Grant would never let up until he had taken the city. If he can't whip the Johnnies he can starve them out, for Gus says that they are hard up for grub already."

There was a bright fire burning in the hide out, and by the aid of the light it threw out, Ned Marsh was able to take a good view of the conscript. He was a dark, handsome young fellow, about twenty two years of age, and in everything except height and breadth of shoulder, he looked as much like Luke as one brother could look like another.

He had been listening to a rapid but glowing account of the exciting things that had happened about the hide out and in the settlement since Ned Marsh came among them, and when the latter sat down beside him he greeted him with great cordiality. It was three o'clock before they knew it; and then Gus jumped to his feet and asked Luke to take him ashore, declaring, at the same time, that he must see his mother without another hour's delay.

That week was a long one to Ned Marsh; but knowing that the returned soldier was better acquainted with the state of affairs about Vicksburg than he was, he curbed his impatience, and did not say a word about delivering his dispatches until the seven days had expired. Then he broached the subject, and was delighted to hear Gus say:

"I think you may safely attempt it as soon as you can get ready. When I deserted, I escaped through the Yankee lines; and when I told the soldiers that I wanted to get home with as little delay

as possible, they urged me to stay with them, assuring me that if I would wait a week, the city would be completely invested, and then I could get across the Yazoo without running the least risk of being captured by the rebels. I have been home just a week, and it took me five days to get here; so the Yanks have had twelve days in which to make good their boast. Yes, I think you may try it now; but be careful when you approach Haines' Bluff, for there's no telling whether your people have got it yet or not."

"Then I shall start this very night," said Ned, gleefully. "I can't wait any longer. Where can I get a guide?"

"Here are two of them," replied Luke, pointing to Joe Ramsay and then to himself. "You will promise that your people will let us come home when we want to, I suppose?"

"Oh, there will be no trouble about that," Gus hastened to say. "I deserted through their lines, and they made no effort to detain me. On the contrary, General Logan gave me a pass, and wished me God speed."

This conversation took place early one morning in Mrs. Bennett's parlor, where Luke, Ned and Joe had passed the night. In fact, they had passed many a night there since the Home Guards received that richly deserved thrashing, and Ryder had never appeared to warn them that another attempt was to be made to capture them. As Gus ceased speaking, Ned took leave of him and his mother, heartily wishing them a happy deliverance out of all their troubles, and returned to the hide out in company with the boys who were to act as his guides.

That day was passed, as many another day had been, in talking over their adventures, and at last, to the intense satisfaction of one of the boys, at

least, it began to grow dark. A hasty supper was eaten, the largest canoe was put into the water, and Ned secured possession of his dispatches, side arms and boat cloak.

"Good by, fellows," said he, giving each of them a warm grasp of the hand. "I am under obligations to you which I never can repay. I can only thank you."

Ned and his guides stepped into the canoe, which in a few seconds more disappeared from the view of the boys who remained in the hide out.

For five long hours they plied their paddles energetically, and during all that time it never occurred to any of them that they had missed their way; but such was the fact.

"This ought to be Black Bayou, but it isn't," said Luke, after he had peered into the darkness in all directions, in the vain effort to get his bearings.

For a few seconds a most oppressive silence reigned, and then it was suddenly broken by the voice of a sentry close by, who beguiled his lonely watch by singing:

"And now," said Jeff Davis, "I know I'm a snorter;
I'll hang on to Vicksburg, I'll do nothing shorter;
And I'll keep those Yankees away from salt water
In spite of their Grant and Admiral Porter."
Sing to de do, de do de doodlede,
Do te do te do te do.

But Porter with ironclad gunboats near,
And Grant with his brave boys right in the rear—
They threw hot shot about his ear,
And made the old chap feel quite queer,
Sing to de do, de do de doodlede,
Do te do te do te do.

Having satisfied himself that everything was right at the river end of his beat, the soldier faced about and walked off.

"Why don't we go on, Ned?" whispered Luke. "That sentry is a Yank, so we have nothing to fear. A rebel wouldn't sing a song like that."

"Don't be too positive on that point," was the reply. "Whenever a soldier hears a song that suits his fancy he sings it without regard to the sentiment. Our boys sing rebel songs as often as the Johnnies do. We've got a good deal at stake, and don't want to take any chances. I wish we were a little closer to the bank, so that we could see his uniform when he returns."

A few minutes later they heard the sentry coming back again. When he reached the bank he leaned upon his musket, and after looking up and down the river, to make sure that there was nothing suspicious in sight, he went on with his song:

Now this gouty old rebel, as every one knows,
Was mighty hard up for his Sunday clothes,
And out of his flag he tried to make breeches,
But the rotten old thing, it wouldn't hold stitches.
Sing to de do, de——

"What in the name of wonder is that?" he muttered, bringing his song to a close and his piece to "arms port" at the same instant. "Looks like something."

In their anxiety to get a glimpse of the sentry's uniform Ned and his companions forgot how strong the current was, and before they were aware of the fact it had carried their canoe out of the shade into the streak of bright water already spoken of, and the soldier's quick eye lighted upon it.

"Halt!" he cried. "*Who* comes there?"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ABOARD THE DECATUR.

"We're discovered, boys," said Ned, calmly, "and five minutes more will decide this matter for us. Friends without the countersign," he shouted, in reply to the challenge.

"Halt, friends!" commanded the sentry. "Corporal of the guard number four!"

The period of waiting was one of dreadful suspense to Ned and his companions. But the corporal was close at hand, and in a few minutes he came hurrying up. He held a short consultation with the sentry, and then called out:

"Who are you?"

"I'm a gunboat officer, and have dispatches for General Sherman," answered Ned, who knew that he could not escape, and that there was nothing to be gained by deception.

"Well, come ashore."

This was the order Ned was waiting for, and he lost no time in obeying it. He was satisfied now that he was among friends. When the bow of the canoe touched the bank, he stepped out.

"I am glad to see that uniform again," said he, shaking the corporal warmly by the hand. "I was afraid you might prove a Johnny. I have been lost in the swamp for a long time. Do you know anything about the Decatur? Where am I, and who commands here?"

"You are on the Yazoo River, a short distance above Haines' Bluff," was the reply. "These are Washburn's lines, and we are faced to the rear, to whip Johnston when he comes to raise the siege. Sherman is just below on the right. He is holding Walnut Hills."

"Why, that is the very ground he fought for last December," said Ned Marsh.

"Of course it is. He has got it now, fast enough, but not in the way he wanted to get it."

"Well, boys, I could talk to you all night," said Ned, "but I don't think I had better waste any more time. Corporal, I wish you would take me before some officer who will have me sent to General Sherman."

In accordance with this request, Ned was conducted into the presence of the officer of the guard, who, after listening to his story and asking him a few questions, detailed an orderly to show him the way to Walnut Hills.

"And will you give my friends safe conduct out of our lines?" asked Ned.

"I will," answered the officer. "Corporal, attend to that, will you?"

"Good by, Luke. Good by, Joe," said Ned, extending a hand to each of them. "Our paths lie in different directions now; but before we part I wish you would tell me what I can do to repay you for all you have done for me."

"You owe us nothing but your good will and an occasional letter," replied Luke, shaking Ned's hand with both his own. "You know our post office address."

"Yes, and you know mine. This war will be over some day, and then I shall hope to see that hide out again. Good by."

The boys separated, Luke and Joe, accompanied

by the corporal, hastening down the bank toward the place where they had left their canoe, and Ned followed the orderly who was to lead him to General Sherman's headquarters. In due time he found himself standing in the presence of "Old Tecums," who was examining his dispatch with rather a quizzical look on his face.

"It seems to me, young man," said he, at length, "that you have been a long time in finding me, haven't you?"

Ned acknowledged the fact, and then proceeded to give a rapid acount of the adventures that had befallen him since that dispatch was placed in his hands, and wound up by telling the general that there were a good many Union people on the other side of the Yazoo, and asking him to bear the fact in mind if he sent any of his cavalry raiding in that direction. He also said a good word for the conscripts who had brought themselves into trouble by trying to help Proctor to escape.

"Well, you seem to have had a time of it," said the general. "I don't think I shall send any of my cavalry across the Yazoo right away, because I haven't any web footed horses in my command. And as for Proctor and the Union men who tried to help him, I guess they are all right. We shall have the city in our possession very shortly, and of course they will be captured with the rest. Now, I suppose you want to go aboard your boat, don't you? Well, she is below the batteries; and as that is quite a long distance from here, I think you had better stay with us tonight, and tomorrow I will send an officer to show you the way."

Ned found sleeping quarters with a young cavalry lieutenant, who gave him a breakfast next morning, provided him with a horse, and accompanied him around the rear of the army to the river below the

city. He was glad when he came within sight of the river and saw the gunboats riding at anchor in the middle of the stream. He was more delighted still when he reached the water's edge, and saw one of the Decatur's boats about to shove off. The young officer in command stared at him as if he could hardly believe his eyes, and then sprang ashore and ran up the bank to meet him. It was his chum, Bob Andrews.

"Why, Ned Marsh, where have you been?" exclaimed Bob, as soon as he could speak. "We gave you up for dead long ago."

"It's a long story, Bob," was Ned's reply; "but you shall hear it all as soon as we can get an hour together. Men, I am glad to be with you again." (This to the boat's crew, who arose to their feet and saluted him as he stepped into the stern sheets.)

The young officer was not more delighted to get back to his vessel than his shipmates were to have him there. He never knew until that day how many warm friends he had aboard the Decatur. She bore a greater number of honorable scars than she did the last time he saw her (she was under a heavy fire for two hours when she ran the batteries), and Ned could not get over sorrowing because he had not been with her when she received those additional wounds. But he never missed a battle after that, and it was his good fortune to serve on her until the close of the war.

When that memorable Fourth of July came and the city surrendered, Ned Marsh made every effort to get ashore; but no liberty was granted until after the rebels had been paroled and marched out, and then it was too late for him to do anything for Mr. Bennett and his friends. He heard from Proctor, however, but did not see him, for that restless individual had departed for a new field of duty. He

wrote to Luke about it, and received most gratifying news in reply.

"Our long separated families are once more united," Luke gleefully wrote. "Pemberton wanted to march them to a camp of instruction (which father says is only another name for a prison pen), and keep them there until they should be exchanged; but our people couldn't see it. They quietly stepped out, and Pemberton will never see them again."

Of Ned's subsequent career in the gunboat service, there is little to be told. He was under fire a good many times, and he had some narrow escapes, too; but he never seemed to care about them. He liked best to gather a party of appreciative friends about him, and tell of the exciting events that had come under his notice while he was sojourning in Luke Bennett's hide out.

THE END.

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